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in the anti-Castro Battalion. Or
three hundred men will die!"

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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JANUARY, 1967 Vol. 20, No. 2

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THE UNSEEN MAN

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Inside Castro's Cuba, free men were being murdered. And to Mike Shayne, a rebel leader had said, "Find the traitor among us, and bring him back. Or all of us are going to die!"

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The Unseen Man

THE NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

by Brett Halliday

"You may not come back, Shayne. If you do not, we will find another agent. But if you live, find the traitor and bring him back alive—or three hundred men will die!"

IN THE DARK night the small power boat ran without lights. The boat moved at full speed, sending sheets of white spray high into the darkness.

A bearded man stood at the wheel. Another man stood in the plunging bow, peering ahead, on watch. Twice the fast boat suddenly shut off its motors and lay silent in the water, a vague shadow without light or sound.

Each time a larger boat passed by. The boats that passed were also without lights and on each a deck gun was ominous on the high bows. Each time the larger boats passed too far away to discover the smaller boat, where it wallowed on the waves in total silence and darkness.

In the waist of the smaller boat, five men crouched low and watched the patrol boats pass. They were dressed in faded United States Army fatigues. Each man

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MIKE SHAYNE HAS NEVER BEFORE FACED DANGER LIKE THIS

carried a rifle and a heavy canvas package.

The five men spoke little. They crouched hidden, their eyes looking up and ahead from time to time. There was sweat on their brows although the night was not hot.

After the second patrol boat had passed, the smaller boat started again and moved fast until it reached a point where land was suddenly visible ahead, a vague patch of greater darkness that was a low, wooded shore. The man in the bow signaled with a silent gesture. The bearded man at the wheel turned to the five men crouched below him in the cockpit of the boat.

"Cuba," the bearded man said softly.

"Si," one of the five men said.

The five men all stood and looked toward the low, wooded shore. The boat moved in very slowly now, its powerful engines making almost no sound.

"It has been a long time," one of the five men said.

"Si, very long," another said.

The bearded man at the wheel said, "It will not be much longer now. Are you ready?"

The five men all nodded. They turned to each other and checked equipment. One of them now picked up a small box with a handle on it. Another took a carefully-wrapped package and held it gingerly.

"You have the fuses?" one man said to the man with the small package.

"Si," the cautious man said.

"Then we go," the first man said.

A rubber raft was already in the water. It bobbed on the swells in the dark night against the side of the motor boat. The five men climbed down the side of the boat and into the raft. There were no more words. The men in the raft pushed of in silence. The raft vanished in the night. The motorboat started its engines and moved off out to sea.

The raft proceeded through the darkness to the first line of breakers. The five men ran the breakers like well-trained experts. At the last instant, through the last breaker, they leaped out as one man and swiftly ran the raft up onto the sand. With speed and silent efficiency they hid the raft in the brush at the edge of the beach, checked their equipment, and moved off into the brush in single file.

Some two hours later, the guards at a large building on the outskirts of Havana were suddenly attacked from out of the night. There were three guards on the main gate of the fence that encircled the building.

All were silently overwhelmed in a matter of seconds.

The five men from the motor boat moved quickly through the gate and up toward the walls of the building. They were preparing

their explosives, fuses, and incendiary material as they trotted silently.

One of them, the obvious leader, waved his men to their places. All knew precisely where to go as if they had rehearsed the attack many times. Each man reached his post.

The glaring searchlights picked out each single man like moths against a wall.

"Do not move!" a voice shouted in Spanish.

"Put down all weapons! Raise your hands!"

"Quick!"

"Now!" The rapid Spanish snapped out.

The five men seemed to freeze in the glare of the lights like stone statues. Two of them tried to run, to raise their rifles. Machine-gun fire rattled. The two men fell riddled. The other three raised their hands, stepped toward the lights.

"Stop! Take off all equipment! Quick!"

The three men threw away their equipment. They stood there with their hands up.

"March forward. Now!"

The three men marched forward. They reached the line of searchlights and passed behind into the darkness. Now it could be seen that the lights were mounted on jeeps. There were three Cuban soldiers in each jeep. Machine-guns were mounted on each jeep. The jeeps ringed the area inside the fence.

The jeeps had obviously been waiting for the five men. The leader of the five looked around. His face showed bitterness. It also showed something else—amazement.

He stood with his hands up and looked around slowly with bitter surprise clear on his face.

A short, heavy-set man stepped out of the darkness. He was swarthy, dressed in civilian clothes too tight for him, and he wore dark glasses even in the night. His fleshy mouth was set in a smile. He let his hidden eyes roam across the faces of the three prisoners behind his dark glasses.

Then his stare became fixed on the leader of the prisoners.

The leader stared back.

The leader was taller than the other men from the motorboat. His skin was dark, but he seemed somehow different. The short man in the dark glasses stepped to the leader and knocked off his fatigue cap—the leader had pale brown hair, almost blonde.

"So!" the heavy-set man said, his eyes still hidden behind his dark glasses.

"How did you find out, Arrellaga?" the leader said.

The heavy man did not answer. His face no longer smiled. He spoke in English.

"You are American. Who are you?"

"A patriot," the American said.

"So? No, I think not. I think you

are here to learn, yes. I think you are a small trap for me, yes?"

The American shrugged. "So you've got an American. Put me on show. It's a real catch for you."

The short man stood rigid behind his dark glasses. "Ah, that you expect, yes? You hope to find the way we find out that you are coming. Perhaps you already think you know?"

The American leader said, "I know that none of us talked. So it must . . ."

The short man turned on his heel.

"Kill them!"

The machine-guns rattled. The three men with their hands up fell, riddled. The short, heavy man did not look around. He walked to a closed black car, took up a radio telephone, and began to talk rapidly.

II

MIKE SHAYNE sat on the jet and thought about the sudden telephone call. The big red-head had been about to close up shop and call it a long day when Lucy had buzzed him.

"On line two, Michael. He won't give his name," her pert voice said. "He won't say what it's about. I've heard the voice before."

"Put him on, Angel," Shayne said to his brown-eyed secretary.

Shayne heard the low voice ask if he was alone. Shayne knew the voice, too. It was not a voice he wanted to hear—Morton Cummings, Central Intelligence Agency case officer for Miami. The last time he had heard the voice eleven people had died!

"I'm alone, Cummings," Shayne assured the CIA man.

"Good," the CIA man said "Mike, you did a good job for us that time in Cuba."

"A good job for you," Shayne said. "Not for me. I don't like the spy game, Cummings."

"Who does?" Cummings said quietly.

"Too many do," Shayne said grimly. "How is Del Gardo?"

"We've still got him."

"But you want me for something?" Shayne said.

"Yes," Cummings said. "We want you for a job."

"If I say no?"

"You won't say no," Cummings said. "We need you, Mike. This job is a vital one, and no one but you can do it."

"No one is that special, Cummings," Shayne said. "If I can do it, others can."

"All right," the voice of Cummings said. "Others could do it, but you're a natural for it. You've got the record, the history to do it."

"What old friend do I have to betray this time?" Shayne said bitterly.

"Only an old enemy—Arrellaga!" the CIA man said quietly. "And that's all I can tell you on the

telephone. In fact that's all I can tell you, period. They want you in Washington."

Shayne sat in silence, the telephone receiver in his big hand, his grey eyes watching the sun low in the sky above Miami outside his office window. He sighed a loud sigh. What could a man do?

"When?" Shayne said.

"Now," Cummings said. "The first jet you can get."

"Who do I see?"

"You'll be met. The sign and countersign are: 'It's a good day for a ball game,' and you say 'Every day is a good day if you win.' He'll counter with 'Then Hodges better play himself.' You have that?"

"I've got it," Shayne said sourly.

"Good. We're counting on you, Mike. This is important."

"To you guys it's all important," Shayne said. "Will I be away long?"

"I don't know that. Tell your secretary some good cover story."

Shayne nodded and hung up. He sat and lit a cigarette. He smoked and he did not like it. He told Lucy that he was going on a case in New York, that he'd be out of touch for a while, if he needed anything he would call her. He did not like that part, either. Now, on the jet approaching Washington, he still did not like it. But they needed him.

When Shayne left the jet he walked slowly toward the main building. He allowed the crowd of passengers to thin. He watched

carefully. The CIA was very hush-hush about everything, but it was amazing how much leaked out. But no one seemed interested in the big red-head, not until a small, stocky man walked up to him as if they were old friends. The man stuck out his hand. Shayne shook hands, waited.

"It's a good day for a ball game," the stocky man said.

"Every day is a good day if you win," Shayne said.

"Then Hodges better play himself," the man said. He nodded faintly toward the left. "Walk with me."

Shayne walked beside the stocky man across the dark airport. To anyone watching they were two friends meeting and discussing baseball. Shayne noticed that they passed at least two shadowy figures lurking in the night of the airport.

The red-head smiled to himself. The real cloak-and-dagger again.

The shadowy men in the night were stake-outs to be sure that no one followed Shayne and the stocky man. No one did. They reached a parking lot. The stock man ushered Shayne into a simple Ford sedan.

"Do we actually go to the ballgame?" Shayne asked drily.

"No, Mr. Shayne," the stocky man said. "But a certain care is necessary to try to protect you later on."

"I apologize," Shayne said with a smile. He disliked the cloak-and-dagger; he disliked the spy game all the way, but they were only doing their jobs and trying to make it as safe as possible for him.

The car drove out of the parking lot. The stocky man did some fancy driving to be sure that there was no pursuit. There was none.

The stocky man settled down to steady driving. They did not go to the Pentagon, or to any other official Government building. They went to a simple brownstone house in downtown Washington.

"Just get out and go inside. You'll be met," the stocky man said. "And good luck."

Shayne got out. The stocky man drove away. Shayne looked after the Ford sedan. He guessed that it would be the last time he would see the stocky man. That was how espionage and counter-espionage worked. Faces that came and went. Anonymous help. No names and no memories and no regrets. Shayne turned and walked into the building.

The inside door opened as if by magic.

A voice greeted him.

"This way, Mike."

It was Morton Cummings. The Miami Area CIA man had beaten Shayne to the rendezvous, which did not surprise Shayne. More of the cloak-and-dagger. Shayne followed Cummings into the hallway, up the stairs to the third floor, and into a small apartment.

Three men waited at a table in the small apartment. One of the men wore civilian clothes. The other two wore the uniforms of colonels in the United States Army. One colonel was tall and black-haired. The other was smaller and his hair was iron-grey. The taller of the two colonels waved Shayne to a chair at the table.

"Sit down, Mr. Shayne," the tall colonel said.

Shayne sat down. The tall colonel nodded to the other men in the room.

"Mr. Cummings you know," the colonel said. "Colonel Moran there, is our chief liason officer with the Cuban Anti-Castro groups in the Florida area. Mr. Valdez is our CIA man planted in the Contreras group."

Shayne nodded greeting to the smaller, grey-haired Colonel Moran, and the silent civilian named Valdez.

"I am Colonel Josephs. My job is here in Washington, working on the entire Cuban situation," the tall colonel said.

Shayne nodded. "I gather this is another Cuban affair. You need me again."

"We need your background, Mr. Shayne," Colonel Moran said.

"I don't matter," Shayne said. "Just my background happens to fit me for a job?"

"You don't matter, right," Colonel Moran agreed. "We have ten men who could probably do the job better. Ten men we'd rather use."

"Thanks," Shayne said.

"Think nothing of it," Colonel Moran said. The grey-haired Colonel had not smiled once.

"But no one else can do the job as well," Colonel Josephs said. "You're the only man who can infiltrate the Contreras group as fast as we need it. And we need it very fast, or some three hundred men will die!"

III

SHAYNE TUGGED slowly on his left earlobe as he looked at the four grim men. The CIA man, Valdez, was watching him closely. The civilian seemed to be worried, his eyes hollow and without sleep. Cummings watched Shayne nervously. Colonel Josephs was solemn. Colonel Moran had a half sneer on his face.

"You always need it fast," Shayne said, "and in your work men are always dying."

"We try to let as few as possible die, Mr. Shayne," Valdez said. "These are good men; they are my friends and our friends. They do not mind dying, but they like to have some chance to live. That is what we want from you—to help them have a fair chance to live."

There was a silence. Shayne tugged harder on his earlobe and sighed. He hated such work; he was against it. It was not his best work, but he knew what he would say.

"What do you want me to do?" Shayne said quietly.

Colonel Josephs smiled. Cummings grinned. Colonel Moran nodded. Only Valdez gave no sign of pleasure. Valdez was clearly close to this work, and he only continued to watch Shayne. It was Josephs who spoke. The colonel drew out a manilla folder and laid it on the table.

He looked at Mike Shayne.

"We want you to offer your services to the Cuban Liberation Battalion headed by Gilberto Contreras. Your work for us against Arrellaga and Del Gardo is known to Contreras and his group. Also your experience in undercover work and irregular fighting. They will welcome you; they will not be suspicious. They will want you with them."

Shayne smiled. "Fine. I'm a Cu-

ban Liberation hero. Now what do *you* want me to do?"

Colonel Moran leaned forward. "We want you to find a leak. A traitor giving information to Arrellaga."

Colonel Josephs waved his hand. "First we better fill Shayne in on the situation. As you know, Shayne, there are various anti-Castro groups outside Cuba. They are in many places. A few groups are training in Florida. One of the best of these is the Contreras Liberation Battalion. They are well-trained, they are a serious group, they have done good work. They will—"

Shayne interrupted. "Just who is Gilberto Contreras?"

"A former Cuban senator," Valdez said. "He was of the moderate left, an opponent of Batista and corruption. He worked with Castro at first. He broke later and came here. He is very high on Castro's death list. The bearded one fears him and for good reason. He is well-liked inside Cuba. That was a major factor in his success up until now."

Colonel Josephs took up the story. "The Contreras Battalion did very good work—until two months ago. Recently, two small probing patrols have been ambushed almost instantly upon landing. In both cases there could have been a mistake. Contreras thinks there must have been. He is loyal to his people."

"But you think otherwise?" Shayne said.

Valdez almost snarled. "We know otherwise! There was a third 'mistake' only two days ago. I set it up so that there could be no mistake. Yet Arrellaga had his men waiting!"

Shayne nodded at Valdez. "Why doesn't Valdez handle this himself? He's in the Battalion. He knows the people."

"That is why, Shayne," Colonel Josephs said. "We cannot afford to blow Valdez's cover. No one knows he is our agent. If he began to snoop, there would be a big risk of discovery. Valdez is too valuable as he is. As Captain Valdez he is on Contreras's staff."

"And I'm expendable?" Shayne said drily.

"You will be a one-shot, Shayne," Colonel Moran said. "If you do the job and are discovered, we do not lose anything. We want only the one task from you."

"Nothing to lose except me, eh?" Shayne said.

Colonel Josephs smiled. "We hope not to lose you, Mr. Shayne. But if you are known after the job we do not lose all the years of work building a cover as we would with Valdez."

Shayne nodded. "I understand. I just wanted to get it clear. I gather I must not contact Valdez in any way. I mustn't work with him."

"You understand correctly," Colonel Moran said.

"You will work with Cummings and Colonel Moran," Colonel Josephs said. "Essentially what we need is for you to get in with the Battalion, and then find the leak. We know that Arrellaga has a direct line of information to the group.

"Somehow he has gotten one of his men into the group. It is a constant problem with the Cuban groups: they are made up of so many different elements. It is impossible to be sure of anyone who offers his services. At least half of them have been with Castro at some time. Even Contreras himself worked for Fidel at a high level."

"Fine," Shayne said drily. "The good senator could be his own leak. It could be any one, right? How many in the Battalion?"

"Three hundred all told," Colonel Josephs said, "but it isn't that bad. You see, Shayne, we can now narrow it down to five people!"

There was a silence in the room. The two colonels and two CIA men looked grim. Shayne watched them. They acted like men who had to think and talk about something they did not like. Josephs spoke to Colonel Moran.

"Would you care to explain, Tom? You know the details."

Colonel Moran shook his head. "Valdez did the real work on the scheme. He better explain it. He was on the spot."

Valdez said, "Two days ago, Shayne, as I said, there was a third 'mistake'. It was a very special mission. Five men on a secret and expert hit-and-run raid on an important gasoline warehouse outside Havana. A raid important enough for the spy to have to report it.

"One of the five men wasn't really a member of the Battalion; he was Joe Masters, a CIA man. His job was to watch everyone who knew about the raid. Colonel Moran and I didn't even report the raid to Washington or CIA headquarters."

Valdez lit a cigarette. "Only Contreras, myself, Raul Yague, Pedro Vargas, Contreras's daughter Luisa, and the men on the raid knew in the whole Battalion. Yague and Vargas are the two top assistants of Contreras. Luisa Contreras is her father's chief of staff. She's an experienced fighter, believe me."

Valdez smoked. "So five of us in the group knew, and the five who were going on the raid. Joe Masters made sure that no word got out beyond those ten. He watched every step of the way until they left the boat at the Cuban coast. The captain of the boat, a trusted man of ours, brought back Joe's word that not one of his men could possibly have leaked the raid."

Valdez stopped, blew smoke. Mike Shayne watched him. He was beginning to understand why they had sent for him. They had it nar-

rowed down; now they needed a detective, not a spy! Shayne watched Valdez as the civilian CIA man smoked angrily.

"But it was leaked?" Shayne asked quietly.

"Arrellaga was waiting," Valdez said. "At least, our contacts in Cuba say it was Arrellaga. All we know for sure is that they were trapped, all five were killed! They killed Joe too."

Shayne nodded. "So the leak has to be one of those five people—including *you*."

"Including me," Valdez said. "I know I'm clean, but you can keep an eye on me, too."

Josephs broke in. "Valdez is not the leak, which leaves four people. We've got to know, Shayne. In a month the whole Battalion is scheduled to infiltrate! The way it is now, none of them would get through.

"They're a picked group, Shayne. They are trained to split up and operate in small units all over the island as a new nucleus of anti-Castro action. Moran here can't give the go ahead until we plug the leak!"

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "All right. I'll find the leak."

Josephs smiled. "Good!"

Valdez did not smile. "There's one other part of the job, Shayne—get Arrellaga! We must have something we can get him on. He's caused us more trouble than any agent of any country. He seems to be everywhere, learn everything. He's clever. He's also greedy.

"We have everything but proof to show that he's bleeding Cuban refugees of every cent. He's the master-mind of the whole spy-blackmail operation in Florida. We want him!"

"And badly," Colonel Josephs said.

"He's the man behind it all," Colonel Moran said. "So when you find the leak, if you do, don't take the man at once. Follow him and see if he can lead you to Arrellaga. Got it, Shayne?"

"I've got it," Shayne said. "All I have to do is infiltrate the Battalion, find which of the four high officers is really a spy, let him lead me to Arrellaga, get the goods on Arrellaga—and somehow get out alive! Thanks for nothing!"

Colonel Moran smiled. "If you're afraid—"

Shayne looked at the grey-haired Colonel Moran. "I'm afraid, Colonel. If I wasn't I'd be a fool, and probably dead. A little fear can sometimes keep you alive. I intend to stay alive."

"Colonel Moran only meant that you do not have to do this for us," Colonel Josephs said.

Shayne shrugged. "Yes, I have to do it. Now tell me how I get started."

Colonel Moran leaned forward. "Your cover is ready. Valdez will take you to Contreras as a volunteer. You will train the Battalion

on detective skills. They'll need them. You'll report to Cummings here, or to me. Never to Valdez, got that? His cover is too important to risk. If you get into trouble, Valdez won't be able to help you. You'll have to get to me or Cummings."

"How?" Shayne said.

"Cummings will give you a drop, an identity sign, and an emergency signal for our office. Anything else."

"Yes," Shayne said. "Some luck."

Shayne stood up. Valdez joined him. The meeting was over. Shayne and Valdez went downstairs and waited for the all clear sign from the man on watch. When they got the sign, they walked out into the night.

Lucy Hamilton

IV

VALDEZ DROVE slowly in the hot sun. The deserted dirt road wound through the Everglades, skirting the deep swamp areas, plunging deeper into the heavy forest and grassland. Shayne held his panama on his head as the car bounced.

Valdez looked around sharply as he drove.

"There should be guards," the disguised CIA man said.

"They must have learned their lessons," Shayne said. "I think I've seen two so far, but pretty well under cover."

"Good," Valdez said. "They're learning. Contreras will be expecting us then."

Moments later the car rounded a curve between a thick growth of trees and five men stood in the road. The men wore United States Army fatigues, and they carried weapons. Their leader was a tall, swarthy man with a bushy mustache who stood out in the road in front of the other four.

Valdez brought the car to a stop in front of the tall man. The disguised CIA man leaned out the car window.

"You want something, Yague?" Valdez said.

The tall man, Raul Yague, did not answer. The swarthy sub-leader of the Cuban Liberation Battalion stepped to the car and looked in.

"This is Shayne, Valdez?" Yague said. The sound of his voice was not friendly. He glared at Shayne.

"Senator Contreras is expecting

Mr. Shayne," Valdez said. "You must have been told, Major."

"I was told," Yague said. "I do not like gringo experts."

Shayne said nothing. It was not part of his job to get into a fight with Yague. The red-head merely smiled and stared Yague straight in the eye.

Turning away, the tall sub-leader motioned to his men. They all sat on the hood and fenders of the car. Yague himself stood on the bumper, held to the hood, and stared at Shayne the whole way into the camp.

Shayne stared back. Yague was not friendly. Did the man know something, suspect that Shayne was maybe more than he seemed? The eyes of the tall sub-leader told Shayne one thing—Yague was trying to understand exactly what Shayne was doing here in the far-out Everglades.

The camp itself consisted of a series of ten flimsy pre-fab buildings one story high, some tents, and a small hut that was obviously headquarters of the Battalion.

Valdez brought the car to a stop in fron the nisson hut. Yague got off and spoke low to his men. The men moved off a few paces but they did not leave.

It was clear that Raul Yague did not trust Mike Shayne.

Shayne only grinned again and followed Valdez into the small hut. Yague came behind them.

Valdez led the way along a narrow corridor to a room at the far end that occupied the full width of the hut.

The first thing that Shayne saw when he entered the room was a small, dark-haired woman. A very good-looking woman. The tight riding breeches she wore accentuated her curves—small but perfect curves. Her tight faded khaki shirt was bursting. She was small, but not everywhere.

But it was her face that was her glory. A smooth, oval, very pale face. An elegant face. Aristocratic. The smooth white of her skin proved that she was just that—a Cuban aristocrat, pure Castilian, and proud enough of it to be sure she did not tan in the sun.

"Mr. Shayne, Senator," Valdez said.

The man behind the small, battered desk smiled and stood up. He extended a thin, pale hand. He, too, was pale skinned, but there was a trace of the sun of the Everglades. His hair was snow white. Well-brushed hair, every strand in careful place. The small man was also proud of his appearance.

Shayne assessed him. He reminded Shayne of pictures of the Mexican patriot Francisco Madero —with white hair. Shayne mentally hoped that Senator Contreras would not share the fate of Madero who had died in front of a firing squad of his "friends."

"A pleasure, Mr. Shayne," Senator Contreras said. "I know of

your exploits in the Del Gardo affair. You are a true and brave friend of free Cuba. We are thankful and grateful for the help you offer us."

Raul Yague snorted. "Who needs help from a gringo private eye? A snooper!"

Shayne did not look at Yague. "From what I hear you need all the help you can get."

Yague flushed. Valdez looked serious. The beautiful woman watched Shayne with a small smile on her perfect lips. Contreras nodded.

"You refer to our recent unfortunate setbacks," the small Cuban leader said. "Yes, something is wrong. Perhaps you can help correct that, Mr. Shayne. That is why you are here?"

Shayne nodded. The words were innocent enough. But Shayne wondered just how they were meant. Supposedly he, Shayne, had heard of the three abortive raids on Cuba by the Battalion, but he was not supposed to know that they had been traps, the result of betrayals by someone inside the Battalion.

Contreras' words could mean that the senator knew Shayne's real reason for being in the camp.

"We are glad Mr. Shayne is here, aren't we?" the woman said, smiling at Shayne, her right hand resting lightly on the fine curve of her hip in the tight breeches. "Whatever his reason may be."

Contreras waved to the woman. "Forgive me, Mr. Shayne. My troubles make me forget my manners. I would like you to meet my daughter Luisa. She is my good right hand. Do not be deceived by her feminine appearance. I believe you have met Major Yague?"

"We're practically brothers already," Shayne said drily.

Yague flushed again. The tall, swarthy Cuban major stepped a half step toward Shayne, his fist clenched.

"I do not like gringo experts! Why do we have Yankees to work with us, Senator? It is interference like this that keeps Fidel in power. Our people do not want to be freed by Yankees!"

Contreras frowned. "Mind your manners, Raul! I have told you that Mr. Shayne volunteered. He has proven his courage and his belief in our cause, and I say we are grateful to have his help!"

Shayne watched the exchange. It was clear that despite his mild appearance and elegant manners, Senator Gilberto Contreras was the true power here. Yague scowled, but said no more.

"Are you perhaps afraid Mr. Shayne will prove we are not so well trained as we think, Raul?" the small, peppery senator said. He banged the desk with his manicured fist. "We must be perfect! We must make no mistakes! That is how Fidel won—he worked hard!

"You say our people do not

want to be freed by Yankees! I say they must learn what freedom means! It means that we all work together! Yankees, Cubans, even Russians,—yes, even Fidel himself if he will! I want true freedom for Cuba! And to have that we must make Fidel know that we will not fail!"

The eyes of Luisa Contreras glowed as she watched her father, Raul Yague looked at the floor. Valdez seemed actually excited by the small speech of Contreras.

There was no doubt that Contreras was the leader of the Battalion. But there was also no doubt that Raul Yague did not completely agree with his chief.

It was even more true that Valdez seemed to have a greater interest in the Battalion than was normal for a CIA man set to watch them all. Maybe Valdez was more involved than anyone knew. His excitement could be an act, but his interest was real.

"So," Contreras said to Shayne, "I talk much too much. You must be tired, Mr. Shayne. Valdez will show you to your tent. I have some business in Miami, but I shall be back by nightfall. Then we will discuss just how you will work."

"I'll be ready," Shayne said. "Have a good trip."

As Valdez led him to his tent, Shayne wondered what business Contreras had in Miami. Was the "business" sudden, or was it a normal trip?

Did the "business" trip have anything to do with his arrival?

He was still thinking about this when Valdez left him in his tent and went off to tend to his own duties. Shayne settled himself in. There was another bed in the tent. The name-tape on the clothes hanging above the bed read: Major Vargas. So they had put him in with the other chief assistant Pedro Vargas, the last of the five possible suspects. So far, he had not seen Vargas, and he did not want to ask about him.

He was considering just how to start turning over rocks to see what worms he could find when he went to the tent flap and saw Contreras get into his staff car. Luisa was with her father. As the car drove slowly off, they were deep in conference.

Shayne had a strong hunch that they were talking about him. It almost confirmed his suspicions when Luisa Contreras looked up at that moment and straight at Shayne where he stood in the opening of his tent.

Shayne knew that he would start his search in the private office of Senator Gilberto Contreras.

VALDEZ introduced Shayne to the group of non-coms of the Battalion he would work with in his training groups, and then the redhead had nothing to do in the camp until Contereras returned. It would be the leader himself who would work out the actual schedule with Shayne.

The detective waited until mid-afternoon, when the camp was nearly deserted, all the men out on their training. Then he walked openly, but alert, to the private office of Contreras. No one observed him, not that he could tell.

Inside the hut he moved lightly down the corridor with amazing silence for such a big man. As he had expected, with Contreras away the office was not guarded. But the door was locked.

It was the work of only seconds for Shayne to open the door with one of the special keys on his key ring.

He stood for a minute in the office, letting his grey eyes study the room. There was the desk, some chairs, and two filing cabinets. There was nothing else except the Cuban flag standing behind the desk. Shayne went to work.

Fifteen minutes later he sat down behind the desk to think. He had found nothing that bore directly on the information leak, But he had found the personnel files on all five people involved.

Contreras himself had been a close friend of Fidel Castro. Luisa had actually worked for Fidel in his Sierra Maestra days. The beautiful woman had been a member of Fidel's picked guard group. Raul Yague had ridden a tank into Havana on the day of liberation from Batista.

Surprisingly, Pedro Vargas had been a major in Fidel's army until less than six months ago, when he had escaped from Cuba by mysterious means not quite clear in his file.

But the real surprise came from the file of Valdez. Shayne tugged slowly on his left earlobe as he read it. Valdez had been a member of an American team that went to work with Castro in the Sierra Maestra. Valdez had remained with Fidel for six months. With what else he knew about Valdez, it was clear to Shayne that Valdez had been keeping a watch on the bearded revolutionary in the days before he came to power.

Shayne closed the Valdez file. All right, Valdez had been with Castro for the CIA. Nothing unusual about that. Only Valdez had not mentioned the fact to Shayne. It was said that Castro was a magnetic man, a persuasive man. Could Valdez have found a new loyalty in the Sierra Maestra?

What better spy to place in a Battalion than a man who was already a CIA spy!

A double agent?

Shayne tugged harder on his earlobe. From what he had learned about espionage, Valdez could very easily be playing a double game. Except that Valdez had set up the last test raid. Would he have exposed himself that much? The answer was—very possibly. Valdez knew that he was all but above suspicion. Who would dream that he would set up a test raid and then

sabotage his own test? A clever agent might do just that.

On the other hand, all of the five had connections to the bearded Cuban dictator. Castro was an intelligent man. The Cuban espionage people were clever and devious, as Shayne had learned in the Del Gardo affair, when they had tried to hoodwink the CIA into accepting a phony leak of vital information.

The Cubans had the help of trained Communist agents. Anything could be used, and what better than the leader of a Battalion being a Castro spy? Or his daughter? Or his two chief assistants?

No, they were all possible suspects. Shayne would have to play it carefully and by ear. Wait for a slip, a mistake. He would—

The noise of trucks made him sit alert. The men of the Battalion were returning to camp. His watch told him that Contreras would probably be back soon. He had no intention of being caught in the senator's office.

Shayne's grey eyes made a quick but careful check to be sure that he had left no evidence of his search. He slipped out of the office and relocked the door.

He started down the corridor. Voices approached from outside the hut. He looked around quickly. There was a door to his right. It was open. Shayne ducked through the door just as the outside door of the hut opened.

Shayne stood behind the door. The footsteps and voices passed outside in the corridor.

He heard the voices of Contreras and Luisa, and a voice he did not know. They were talking about him! The voice he did not recognize wanted to know what Shayne was really doing at the camp.

"I don't believe he's just a volunteer," the strange voice said. "Why would he volunteer?"

"Why?" Contreras's voice said. "Because he believes in our cause! He has proven that much, Major Vargas."

"I wonder, father," the voice of Luisa Contreras said. "He is a detective, not a man of principle."

"A detective then cannot be a man of principle, Luisa?"

"He was in Cuba; he met Arrellaga," Luisa Contreras said.

"That worries me also," Vargas said.

Then the voices faded, the door of Contreras's office closed behind them. Shayne did not hear Contreras's answer, but it was fairly obvious that his cover was not working too well. It was also obvious that the Cubans were nervous. Valdez had told Mike Shayne that the three abortive missions had been explained as the result of bad training.

As far as Valdez knew the rank-and-file and the leaders accepted this, knew nothing of the leak. But now Shayne was not so sure. They were nervous about a stranger.

Shayne slipped out the door into the corridor. He reached the outer door without incident. He waited until a group of the Cuban soldiers passed close to the door, and walked quickly out unseen. Once in the open he walked straight to his tent.

Shayne saw immediately that Vargas had been in the tent. The locker of the major stood open. Equipment from the field was on Vargas's bed. And something else. Pushed under the pillow was a small piece of paper. Shayne, after checking at the tent flap to be sure Vargas was not coming, picked it up. Obviously a message had been hidden, hastily, probably because Contreras or his daughter had surprised Vargas. The way the equipment was strewn on the bed, and the fact that the locker door was still open, seemed to confirm this.

The piece of paper told its own story. It was a hastily scribbled note, probably as a result of some message: *Shayne—Paradise Motel—Miami—midnight—4-C.*

Shayne looked at the note for some time. It added up to a simple fact: someone wanted to meet Pedro Vargas in the Paradise Motel in Miami at midnight. To meet and talk about Mike Shayne! His cover was getting thinner and thinner.

Shayne tugged hard on his left earlobe. He did not like the whole set-up.

He liked it even less after he returned the note to its place under the pillow. Shayne went to his own bunk and locker after returning the note. He knew instantly that his bags had been searched!

A good, professional job, but someone had searched his luggage. Someone wanted to know more about Shayne. Considering the note he had just found, it almost had to be Vargas. He was almost certain —but not quite. Contreras and his daughter had gone into Miami, yes, but he could not be certain of just when one or both had returned.

He had not seen Yague or Valdez all afternoon. Supposedly Yague and Valdez had been training in the bush the same as Vargas, but it was guerilla training. Shayne did not think it would be too difficult for one or all to slip away.

The informer could still be all or any of them—but one of them had an appointment tonight at The Paradise Motel. Shayne decided that he would be there.

He ate that evening with the men of the Battalion. They were an eager, brave group. They believed in their cause, but so did the eager and brave men of Fidel Castro. He watched them as he ate, and he thought that somewhere in Cuba another group of men were eating their dinner equally convinced of their purpose and their eventual triumph. Many of them would die, on both sides. But at least he could try to see that the fight was more-or-less equal.

As he ate chile and beans and

talked easily with Contreras, the big red-head watched the others. He watched for any signs of either worry or nervousness. Raul Yague seemed perfectly normal, explaining some points to the men at his mess table. The only sign that the tall Cuban had anything on his mind beyond his work was that he glanced, from time to time, toward Shayne.

Pedro Vargas, whom Shayne had finally officially met in the mess hall, spent his entire meal in conversation with Valdez. Vargas had turned out to be a man of average height, neither dark as Yague nor light as Contreras, clean-shaven, and with only one distinguishing mark, a long scar on his face received in his escape from Cuba. Vargas, too, looked at Shayne from time to time. The scarred major ate very little. Valdez relished his meal. He did not look at Shayne.

Contreras talked easily through the meal, explaining to Shayne exactly how he would like the big red-head to work in training the men of the Battalion.

"They are brave men, Senor Shayne, but they are young and too eager. It is care they must learn, the caution and alertness that is the only true defense of a guerilla in a small land like Cuba. They must learn how not to be observed, how to move safely in the cities, how to break and enter, how to recognize danger, how to best detect what they want."

"I'll do my best," Shayne said, although the red-head was not sure he was going to have time to do much training. His cover was already shaky, events seemed to be moving very fast. It did not look much like he was going to do the slow and careful observation Josephs and Moran seemed to have expected.

"There will not be much time," Contreras said. "We will be going to our jobs in Cuba very soon. In fact—"

"Father!" Luisa Contreras snapped.

The girl sat on the other side of the Senator. She had also eaten little, had toyed with her food, had listened to her father and Shayne the entire meal. Now her dark eyes flashed.

Contreras looked at her. "So? You do not trust Mr. Shayne?"

"I trust no one," Luisa said. "But trust or not, I do not think it good to give out such information as our time of attack to anyone unauthorized. Colonel Moran did not authorize Mr. Shayne that far."

Shayne nodded. "Miss Contreras is quite right, Senator. I'm not authorized to have such information and I don't want it. My job is to help you train, nothing more. The less I know, the less I can tell."

"As you wish, Mr. Shayne," Contreras agreed.

The evening meal ended soon after. Yague and Vargas went to conduct their evening classes. Valdez

went to work on his job of getting equipment ready. Contreras and his daughter said that their trip had tired them and left for their quarters. Shayne also pleaded a long day and went towards his tent.

En route he procured a jeep and parked it ready out of sight at the side of the road. Then from his tent Shayne could see the only road out of camp. He lighted a cigarette and waited. At nine o'clock that night he had his first surprise.

Contreras and his daughter came out of their quarters in a hurry, called for the senator's car, and drove off fast down the road that led to the highway toward Miami.

Shayne swore softly and pulled on his left earlobe.

But he waited.

Ten minutes later Raul Yague appeared and walked quietly to his car.

The tall, swarthy Cuban said something to a soldier and kissed his fingers to the air. The soldier laughed. Yague got into his car and drove off down the single road.

Shayne looked at his watch. It was about a two hour drive, plus or minus, to Miami. If anyone else were leaving camp it would have to be soon. It was soon.

Vargas appeared. The major was agitated. Shayne saw him look at his watch, glance quickly around, then stride quickly to a jeep. Vargas also drove away along the road. Shayne checked his automatic, surveyed the Battalion area, and slipped out of his tent. He moved carefully across the open area between the tents and barracks. He reached his hidden jeep.

Shayne got into the jeep and prepared to start the engine. He stopped. Another car was coming along the road from the camp. Shayne crouched low in his jeep in the bushes. Another jeep passed along the road, going fast. Shayne stared at the man who drove it—Valdez!

As the last jeep faded away in the night toward the main road, Shayne sat and tugged on his left earlobe. All of them! Even Valdez.

The red-head frowned and his grey eyes were flat as steel plate.

All of them. Coincidence? Somehow that was hard to believe. Perhaps others had seen the note he had found under Vargas's pillow. If so, they could be on their way to see just who Vargas was to meet at the Paradise Motel.

And if that were true, the sooner Shayne reached Miami the better. He gunned his motor and pulled onto the road. He made a sharp turn and drove fast toward the main road. When he reached the main road he stopped. He looked down at where the dirt road led into the concrete of the main highway.

Many tracks led from the dirt road and turned on the highway toward Miami. None turned the other way.

Shayne gunned his motor again and turned toward Miami. He drove fast. A half an hour later he pulled off the main highway into a small black topped road. It was a shortcut he knew. It would save a half an hour on the normal time into Miami. He doubted that any of the others knew the short-cut.

With luck, he would be first at the Paradise Motel.

VI

THE PARADISE MOTEL was a small, shabby motel on the western edge of Miami. It was set back from the highway, its cabins hidden among trees and brush. Its driveway was dirt and dusty. The office was directly in from the road at the first curve in the dirt driveway.

At this late hour, twenty minutes before midnight, all the cabins were dark. The Paradise Motel was apparently not a place where the livelier people stopped for the night. Nothing seemed to move on the grounds of the motel, not even in the office with its single feeble light.

Shayne drove past once to study the area. He saw nothing, and drove back more slowly. There were cars parked before two of the cabins. The other cabins appeared deserted.

Shayne drove past again and parked a few hundred yards up the road off the highway. He had seen none of the cars or jeeps driven away from the camp by his five suspects.

He left his jeep off the road, pointed away from Miami, and walked cautiously toward the shabby motel and its silent office. When he reached the driveway he again studied the entire motel area. There were still only the two cars, neither of which he knew. Everything seemed peaceful.

He walked through the trees to the office.

Shayne peered into the office through a window. The single light hung on a cord over a dilapidated desk-counter. There was a shabby couch, two moth-eaten chairs, some ancient magazines, and a tiny

switchboard behind the desk-counter. The switchboard was silent.

A tall, impossibly thin man sat in a chair in front of the switchboard behind the counter. He was asleep. His cadaverous legs stretched out straight before him like cloth-wrapped toothpicks. His sunken chest moved up and down regularly and laboriously.

Shayne watched him for a time. The man was deep in sleep. Apparently business was as bad at The Paradise Motel as it seemed to be. Shayne let his grey eyes scrutinize the rest of the dingy office. He saw nothing of interest until he looked at the key board. Three keys were missing. Two of them were undoubtedly to the cabins with the two cars in front of them.

The third was to cabin 4-C!

Shayne turned and slipped away from the window. He did not at this point want to risk exposure by inquiring about the occupant of cabin 4-C. Instead, he moved cautiously through the trees and bushes to the cabin.

The cabin was dark and there was no car in front. It seemed totally deserted.

It was not. After a time Shayne saw a very faint light at the edge of drawn shades in the cabin's front window. And when he circled the cabin he saw a small black car parked on a dirt road a few yards away behind the cabin. Someone was in the cabin, waiting.

Shayne crouched low in the trees, facing the only door in or out of the cabin. He settled down to wait. His watch now showed that it was ten minutes until midnight. The cabin reamined dark and silent; nothing showed but the tiny edge of light as if someone inside had a small flashlight or a candle on. Nothing moved.

The traffic passed on the highway, cars that came and went in the night, the sounds of their motors clear long after their lights had flashed past. A single car drove up to the motel office. Shayne tensed. But the car was not one of those he expected to see.

He saw two half-giggling, half-frightened girls get out, followed by two youths trying to act manly but who were, in fact, almost as frightened and twice as nervous as the girls. The two boys went into the motel office. They came out moments later, followed by the now awake clerk.

The clerk looked casually at the two girls, snickered, and led them all toward a shabby cabin in the row. The four young people followed in silence like lambs following a Judas goat. Shayne watched them vanish into the cabin, watched the cadaverous clerk return and re-enter the office. The clerk would be asleep in minutes.

He was still thinking about why it was so hard to grow up, why each generation had to learn the same things over and over, when another car slowed as if to turn from the

highway into the motel. Shayne tensed.

The car passed on.

Shayne relaxed again. Some wise tourists had taken one good look at The Paradise Motel and decided that they did not mind driving a little longer.

Shayne looked at his watch. It was now midnight.

In the cabin where the four young people had gone there was low laughter. Maybe the boys were not as nervous as they had seemed. Or maybe it was the girls who were not as frightened as it had appeared. It was a good sound, the sound of girls and young men laughing in a cabin at night.

No other cars slowed.

It was now ten minutes after midnight. Shayne was puzzled. Someone was inside cabin 4-C. Someone was waiting. Yet it was past midnight and no one had arrived. Had the spy learned that Shayne knew about the meeting?

No, that couldn't be. No one had any way of knowing that Shayne had found that note.

It was twenty minutes past midnight. No car had even slowed. Shayne stood up. Whoever was supposed to come, Vargas or one of the others, was not coming. And yet someone was inside Cabin 4-C.

Shayne took out his automatic and clicked off the safety. He moved silently toward cabin 4-C. Outside he listened. There was still no sound inside the cabin. Carefully, the red-head tried the door. It was not locked!

Shayne put his hand on the knob, took a deep breath, and burst into the room.

Five feet inside the door he stopped, froze.

The room was small. A door led from the rear of the main room into some other room ,probably a bedroom. The living room was furnished with cheap and dingy pieces. There was a bare wood table. A tiny night light stood on the table. A man sat in one of the two chairs at the table.

The man was short and heavy-set. He was dressed in civilian clothes too tight for him and of a Latin cut. His fleshy mouth hung open. His swarthy skin was pallid. His hands hung in his lap. His eyes were hidden by dark glasses. He did not move as Shayne burst in. Nothing moved. The man sat there, his hands in his lap, his head back, his mouth open.

The man was dead.

Shayne stared. He did not have to guess who the dead man was. He knew. He had seen that short, heavy figure before. He had seen those dark glasses and that fleshy mouth. He had seen the thick and swarthy hands.

Arrellaga!

Shayne stood with his pistol in his hand and looked at the dead Cuban agent. No more than a few seconds had passed since he broke into the cabin. Now he knew why

he had heard no sound, and why no one had come for the midnight meeting.

Somehow, Arrellaga had learned about him, Shayne, and the meeting had been called.

But the other man had reached the cabin first!

Shayne stepped to the body of the Cuban. Blood and two holes in the dead man's chest told him how Arrellaga had died. There were powder-burns around the holes. A gash in the far wall told Shayne that Arrellaga had been killed in the cabin.

No one had heard shots or there would have been police. Which meant a silencer, which also meant that the killer had come ready to kill. The only question was—which one? Vargas had had the note, but anyone could have placed that note under Vargas's pillow. There was no reason to rule out any of the five.

It was the shock, the surprise at seeing the dead body of Arrellaga. Shayne bent over the body with his back to the inner door, his mind, for a second, not alert.

He broke in, saw the body, froze, and then went to Arrellaga in a reflex move. For that instant his brain failed to work, to warn him.

He failed to see the danger.

The first he heard was a soft step behind him.

Shayne tried to turn.

All he saw was that the door to the inner room was now open.

Something very hard smashed against his skull.

He fell unconscious.

VII

MIKE SHAYNE came awake. His head hurt but there was no blood. The blow had been hard, but not lethal, intended only to knock him out for a short time. It had served its purpose.

Shayne stood up shakily. He felt his head. It was soft and there was a lump, but it was not serious enough to need any treatment. His automatic was on the floor. He picked it up and looked around.

Arrellaga was still in the chair.

The door to the small bedroom was open, but Shayne checked it anyway. He did not want to make the same mistake twice. He had been suckered, and he knew it. The killer of Arrellaga had been waiting in the room for him to arrive —or for someone to arrive.

Shayne returned to the living room and searched the dead Cuban. Arrellaga had money, a pistol, keys and nothing else. The dead agent's wallet was gone. His pockets had been searched. For what?

For something important enough to kill for!

Information to the identity of the spy?

It was possible, and yet—

Shayne stopped thinking. He had heard the light footsteps outside the cabin. Someone was mov-

ing cautiously up to the cabin. It was only then that Shayne noticed that the outside door was partly open, as if the killer, the man who had attacked him, had run out so fast he had not bothered to close the door.

A shadow appeared across the opening in the door. Shayne moved like a big cat, silently, and flattened himself against the wall behind the door. The person outside hesitated. There was a short silence. Shayne guessed that whoever was outside cabin 4-C was looking in through the opening in the door to see everything possible before risking an entry.

Shayne waited.

The door suddenly opened and a man jumped into the room. The man had a gun in his hand. It was pointed at Arrellaga.

Shayne stepped out.

"Drop it!"

The man jumped, half-turned.

"Freeze!" Shayne snapped.

The single light glinted on Shayne's pistol.

"I said drop it," Shayne snapped.

For a moment the man did not move. Then he spoke.

"Shayne? Is that you?"

Shayne watched as the man stepped into the feeble path of light. It was Valdez.

Shayne did not lower his pistol. Valdez noticed this. Slowly the CIA agent put his own pistol into his pocket and stood facing the redhead.

"What are you doing here, Valdez?" Shayne said.

"The same as you, I imagine," Valdez said. "Did you see the man?"

"What man?" Shayne snapped.

"The one who ran out of here minutes ago."

Shayne watched Valdez. "No, did you?"

"Not clearly. I was watching the cabin. I saw you go in. Moments later a man ran out and vanished into the trees. I heard a car start. He must have had it parked in the trees off the road."

Shayne listened. The story could be true, or Valdez could have been the killer himself. Shayne was not at all sure of Valdez after what he had learned in Contreras's office about the history of the CIA man. Only he could not at the moment think why Valdez would have returned if he had been the killer—unless that itself was the reason: to make Shayne believe him!

Shayne put his pistol back into its holster. "Maybe you better start at the beginning, Valdez."

Valdez nodded. "Well, I saw that note under Vargas's pillow. I gather that you saw it also, Shayne. I waited until I could see who would leave camp tonight. I saw them all leave, and I followed. I arrived here about five minutes to midnight. The cabin was dark, I saw no one and none of the cars. I hid and waited.

"It became clear that no one was

to arrive tonight. Then I saw you! It was a hell of a surprise. I had no idea you were here, too. I watched you go to the cabin and go in. I waited another minute or so. Then I heard the sound of something heavy falling. A man ran out. It was too far and too dark for me to see who it was.

"I chased him. He went through the trees. I followed. But I heard the car start up, and I knew I didn't have a chance to catch him. So I came back and waited again. When you didn't come out in a few minutes, and there was no sound inside the cabin, I decided I had better have a look. Here I am."

The CIA agent shrugged and reached into his pocket. Shayne tensed. Valdez brought out a cigarette and lighted it. He offered one to Shayne. The red-head nodded and took it.

The two men smoked for a time in silence. Then, as if on a signal, they both looked at the body of Arrellaga.

"Who would kill him?" Shayne said. "That's what I don't get. Why would one of our suspects kill him?"

"If it was one of our suspects," Valdez said. "Arrellaga had dealings with a lot of agents, traitors, spies, and just plain greedy characters."

Shayne nodded. "Okay, but let's think about our four just for a minute. That note must have been from Arrellaga. You and I saw it, and here we are. Why didn't one of them keep his, or her, midnight appointment?"

"Because he, or she, kept it earlier—and killed Arrellaga," Valdez said.

"Why? Why would his own agent kill him?" Shayne said.

Valdez rubbed his chin. "That I can't tell you, but there has to be a reason. You say he was searched? Then our killer was after something tangible. Perhaps evidence that would betray our killer."

"Why would Arrellaga want to betray his own agent?" Shayne said.

"That I don't know either," Valdez said. The CIA man looked at the dead body of Arrellaga still propped up in its chair at the bare wood table. "But I know this: we'll know more when we find our spy, if Arrellaga was killed for any reason connected to the Contreras case."

"And if he wasn't killed for a reason connected to our case?"

"Then we may never know why he was killed," Valdez said. The undercover man frowned. "And with Arrellaga dead, we may never know who our spy is."

Shayne was grim. "At least part of my job is done. Arrellaga has been had. And won't our agent find a new contact?"

"Not if he killed Arrellaga," Valdez said. "That could only mean he was covering his tracks. We may never find him now. But that really doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it matter?" Shayne snapped.

"No, not if he is covering his tracks. He won't be of any more use to the Castro people if he's gone to ground," Valdez said. "That's what counts: the leak will be plugged. It's not important whether we find the spy or not."

"Only the job, right?" Shayne said. "The people don't really matter. You don't care if you catch him or not as long as he stops reporting."

"That's the name of the game, Shayne," Valdez said.

"I know," Shayne said grimly, "but I'm not on the team. I want to know who he is. I was hired to find a spy, and I want to find him. I want to catch him."

"I don't know, Shayne. I'll have to talk to Moran. It looks like Arrellaga blew your cover anyway. That has to be the reason for this meet."

"You don't get rid of me so easy," Shayne said. "I'll have a chat with Colonel Moran."

Valdez smiled. "I'd just as soon see him caught, and nothing says for sure he won't keep on working. Moran'll probably give you a green light."

"If not I'll go over his head," Shayne snapped. "I don't like spies, and I don't like killers, and I don't like being slugged from behind!"

Valdez's smile widened. The CIA man was about to laugh at Shayne's anger. The laugh never came.

Neither Shayne nor Valdez heard them approach. One instant there were only Shayne and Valdez in the room, the next the two Americans were looking into the muzzles of four Czech-made pistols.

The four men were small and thin and their eyes had a fanatic gleam. They slipped silently through the door into the cabin, and moved through the room with soundless efficiency.

One stood just inside the door, just out of sight from outside, and covered Shayne and Valdez with his pistol.

The second walked rapidly through the room, past Shayne and Valdez, into the bedroom. He came out moments later, closed the bedroom door so that the living room could not be seen from the bedroom windows, and covered Shayne and Valdez from the rear.

The third went straight to the

window of the living room on the right. He stood with his pistol ready and watched out the window. He did not once look back at Shayne or Valdez.

The fourth stopped just inside the door, turned, stood to the left of the door, and watched the area in front of the cabin. This man also had his pistol ready, and he never looked behind him at his comrades or at Shayne and Valdez. He remained on watch out the door.

This had all taken a matter of seconds. Not a word had been spoken. For another long ten seconds the scene remained frozen. Then the man who faced them motioned with his pistol that Shayne and Valdez were to walk out the door.

The four men had not once looked at the body of Arrellaga. But Shayne knew that it was Arrellaga that had brought these men to the cabin.

"We didn't kill him," Shayne said.

"You come. Quick!" the man who faced them said.

"We want to know who killed him, too," Shayne said.

The man clicked his safety.

Shane started for the door. Valdez came behind him. They stepped out into the night. The four men moved like wraiths in well-oiled precision. The man behind remained behind, his hand in his pocket. The one who had been at the window fanned to the left. The man on the door came out and fanned to the right. The one who had spoken moved ahead of Shayne and Valdez.

Still they had not spoken a word to each other.

The man ahead, the leader, turned.

"Go. The road."

Shayne and Valdez were walked quickly across the dirt parking area in front of the cabins and into the strip of trees and bushes between the motel and the highway. No one saw them. The four men moved so fast and precisely that there was no time for anyone to see anything but six men walking in the night.

The instant they reached the highway on the far side of the grove of trees a long black car pulled up. It seemed to come from nowhere. One instant the highway was empty; the next the black car was there and Shayne and Valdez were being pushed inside.

The black car sped away. A second car pulled up and picked up the last three of the men. In the black car Shayne and Valdez sat in the back seat. There were no door handles inside the back seat. The single gunman sat in the front seat and faced them.

The entire operation had taken no more than three minutes.

Shayne and Valdez, helpless in the back seat of the black car, could only wait to learn where they were going.

The two cars drove south

through Miami and straight on south toward the Florida Keys.

VII

MIKE SHANE and Valdez were blindfolded an hour before the car turned off the highway. The black car stopped and pulled off the road. The second car parked directly behind. The leader of the men opened the door of the rear seat from outside and waved Shayne out.

He sat again in the back seat while Valdez stepped out. Valdez was helped back in. The door closed. The big car drove off again along the highway.

An hour later Shayne felt the turn from the highway, the slowing of the car as it bumped along a dirt road. He heard a faint movement of trees in a light wind. For some time that was all he heard.

Then there was the sound of bushes brushing against the car. The road had narrowed. The ruts and holes were deeper and the car slowed even more. Still it bounced heavily, its springs groaning.

Then Shayne heard the sound of the sea. He smelled the salt water. The wheels of the car seemed to slide and churn. They were in sand.

The car stopped.

The door of the rear seat opened and hands reached in and touched Shayne. He was roughly pulled out of the car and stood on his feet. A push sent him walking through sand toward the sound of the surf. He heard the sibilant swish of palm branches in a gentle wind.

Shayne stumbled and fell three times before he reached the house. Each time he was jerked up and pushed on. His feet at last felt wood —wooden steps. There were four steps up to a kind of porch. The porch rocked lightly. It was some kind of beach house on stilts.

Shayne was pushed through a doorway. He stumbled on the jamb. Even behind his blindfold he could tell that the inside of the cabin was dark. A noise behind him told him that Valdez was with him.

Hands pushed Shayne down into a chair. His hands were tied behind the chair. The blindfold was whipped off. Shayne blinked. But the room was dark and he could see quickly.

There was no light in the room, but it was poorly built and the morning sunlight filtered through cracks between the boards. They had driven for most of the night and it was now a bright dawn outside the shack.

Valdez was tied to a chair beside him. The four men, and two men who must have been the drivers, stood in the room. They leaned quietly against the rickety walls. Two smoked. One squatted down on his heels and stared straight at Shayne. The eyes of this squatting man said that he would kill Shayne with very great pleasure.

Directly in front of Shayne and Valdez there was a bare wood

table. A man sat behind the table. In the darkness of the room the man was no more than a shadow. He wore a hat low, his face hidden. There was a lamp on the desk. Now the man switched on the lamp. It shone straight into the eyes of Shayne and Valdez.

With the light on the man became only a vague shape behind it. Only his hands were clear. Small, soft hands resting flat on the table. Pale hands that moved in small gestures like tiny animals as the man talked.

Shayne watched the hands. There was a large signet ring on the third finger of the right hand.

"So you have killed Arrellaga," the man said. "You will tell me why you killed Arrellaga."

The voice of the man was quiet and low. A soft voice, as soft and smooth as the hands that rested on the table in the light. But beneath the softness there was a menace, an edge of power. The man spoke clear English. But there was an accent, faint but unmistakeable. A Spanish accent.

"We know you, Mr. Shayne. It will do you no good to lie to me," the man said.

"Then you know I don't kill people," Shayne said.

The man's hands flicked as if flicking a fly off the table. The soft fingers seemed to point now toward Valdez.

"You, Captain Valdez, you too were there to kill Arrellaga. Why?"

"I didn't kill Arrellaga," Valdez said.

There was a silence. The six men who were ranged around the walls of the shabby shack had not moved a muscle. They still did not move. Their eyes simple stared, cold and flat, at Shayne and Valdez tied to the chairs. The soft pale hands waved shortly in the light on the table.

"Come, we know. You, Valdez, are a member of the Contreras group of counter-revolutionaries. We know that you plan to infiltrate soon. Arrellaga was aware of all your plans. He was working last night on a special project. He so told me himself."

The hands twitched back toward Shayne like flat little fish resting in the light.

"You, Shayne, are a private detective. You have joined the Battalion of Contreras to train the fascists. But one wonders, yes? You have met Arrellaga once before. It is possible you are with Contreras to do more than train the men, yes? It is possible you are there to learn how it is Arrellaga can learn so much of Contreras's Battalion."

"How did he?" Shayne said.

"Ah," the voice said. There was again a silence. "You joke, Mr. Shayne? Or perhaps you know far too much, yes? Perhaps you will tell me how Arrellaga learned so much of Contreras's plans?"

"No, I won't tell you," Shayne said. "I won't because I can't.

Would I kill Arrellaga without knowing that much? How did I find Arrellaga? Have you thought of that? Arrellaga was there in that cabin. He had to be because you would not have known where he was if he hadn't left word."

Again the silence rested on the shack. The dark of the room was crossed with the narrows paths of sunlight through the cracks between the wall boards. Behind the light that shined on Shayne and Valdez the man was a rigid shadow. The pale hands moved, waved like soft tentacles.

"Go on, Mr. Shayne. Continue," the quiet voice said.

"Arrellaga was to meet someone in that cabin. He had to be meeting someone. Would he have set up a meeting with me? No. I had no way of contacting Arrellaga, and he had no reason to contact me. Why would he want to meet me?"

"A point. But, then, perhaps you are working to learn how he learned of Contreras's plans. Perhaps he knew this. Perhaps he lured you there to kill you!"

Shayne laughed. "I'm pretty sure he would have had better and safer ways of dealing with me. Would he take the risk of facing me alone himself? Risk my killing him?"

"Then tell me how you were there?" the voice said. The hands moved faster now, with agitation.

"Simple. I found a note. It indicated some kind of meeting at The Paradise Motel at midnight in cabin 4-C. I went and watched. At twenty minutes after midnight I went in. Arrellaga was dead. Someone hit me on the head. Valdez came later. Then your troops arrived."

"So? How did Captain Valdez get there?"

"I found the same note," Valdez said.

"And you both think that this note was for the spy Arrellaga had inside the Battalion of Contreras?"

"Yes," Valdez said.

The hands moved out of sight. The silence was long. There was a sound and a small flame cupped. The hands came back. One hand held a cigarette that smoked. Smoke blew out into the room from behind the light.

"Why would an agent of ours wish to kill Arrellaga? For what reason?"

"That puzzles me, too," Shayne said bluntly. "Maybe because we were getting close."

"Ah? No, impossible! If the agent with Contreras feared exposure he would merely request a return to Cuba. To kill Arrellaga needs much more reason."

Shayne nodded slowly.

"I know," he said. "Much more reason. You said he had a special project?"

This time the silence hung on the room like an ominous thundercloud. The six impassive men all shifted in their positions for the first

time. The one who squatted hunched closer toward Shayne. The hands with the cigarette were absolutely still.

"What I said is of no importance to you," the voice said.

Shayne ignored the implicit threat.

"It might be damned important. Whatever it was probably killed him. Something special. What could be special about a meeting with his agent?"

"You are what killed him, Mr. Shayne. You or Valdez! We know how to deal with those who kill our people!"

Shayne leaned as far forward as he could. "If we killed him, our pistols would have been fired. That should be easy to check."

The hands seemed to freeze on the table. Nothing moved in the room. Then the hands flicked toward the small gunman who had been the leader of the four who captured Shayne and Valdez. The soft voice was no longer soft. It spoke in sharp Spanish.

"You observed the pistols?"

"Yes," the man answered in Spanish. *"Si."*

"They were fired?"

"No. All bullets remained in the pistols. There was no odor of powder. The pistols were not fired."

"Ah," the voice said, soft again. The hands vanished, returned with a fresh cigarette. The hands rested on the table in the light. "There could be other pistols. We will

learn. But for now let us say that you did not kill Arrellaga. You are enemies of my country. It is the same."

Shayne shrugged. "I thought you wanted to find out who killed Arrellaga."

"You know?"

"I've got an idea," Shayne said.

"So?"

"Not the name, just an idea," Shayne said.

"Tell me this idea," the voice said.

Shayne seemed to think. "There's a question. One question.

You don't know who the spy is in the Contreras Battalion, do you?"

The hands rested flat. The voice was silent. Then the hands came up in a kind of tent, a gesture of prayer, the fingertips touching.

"No, Mr. Shayne, we do not know."

IX

VALDEZ let out a snort of surprise. The CIA man's eyes were more than surprised. Shayne thought that it could be an act. Valdez was not out of this, especially now.

"Only Arrellaga knew?" Shayne said to the voice.

"Yes. The resident director himself was the only man who knew. He said that this was important in this case. There could be no chance of discovery."

Shayne nodded. "That gives us a motive."

"Motive, Mr. Shayne?"

"Arrellaga was searched. Did your boys notice that? His pockets were ripped out; he'd been stripped of anything that might have papers in it."

"So?"

"So our killer was looking for something. Since only Arrellaga knew who the agent in the Contreras Battalion was, it stands to reason that what the killer wanted was some evidence of his identity. I don't figure Arrellaga would overlook getting a good hold on his agent."

"The resident director knew his work," the voice snapped.

"I'll bet he did," Shayne said drily.

But the voice was not listening now. The pale hands moved in sharp circles on the table. "So. You are suggesting that Director Arrellaga arranged a meeting with his agent. The agent came. The agent was worried that his position was becoming dangerous. For some reason he did not wish to return to Cuba. He attempted to get some incriminating evidence from the resident director. Arrellaga resisted and was killed."

Shayne nodded. "Something like that. The only part I can't figure is why the agent wouldn't want to go home to Cuba; he'd be a hero. That, and why Arrellaga was so careless when meeting a scared agent. They both had to be worried. That note at the camp mentioned my name."

"Spies change their minds, Mr. Shayne," the voice said. "I expect we will learn the reason. Meanwhile, allow me to thank you. You are a good detective. You have told me what I wanted to know. I know what we must do now. Estaban!"

The man who squatted and stared at Shayne jumped up. He smiled. The hands vanished from the circle of light on the table. Shayne saw the shadow behind the light move, stand. The man was taller than his voice, a tall, slender shadow behind the glare of the light in Shayne's eyes.

"Take them out, Estaban," the voice said. "After we have gone, kill them."

Estaban grinned. He almost licked his lips as he looked at Shayne and Valdez. Shayne and the CIA man sat silent. Behind the light the voice was quiet.

"You are both enemies of my Government. In addition, you now know far too much. You are too good a detective to leave alive, Mr. Shayne. Estaban will make it quick."

Mike Shayne and Valdez said nothing.

The light went out. The figure of the tall thin man went through the room and out the door into the sunlight. Three of the other men followed.

Shayne and Valdez were left with Estaban and the other two, who still had not moved from where they lounged against the wall.

The sunlight streaked the floor of the shack. Outside a car motor started. One car. Shayne listened carefully. Only one car had started, the big black car from the sound of the engine. He heard it move away and fade into the distance.

Two of the men turned and left the shack. Only Estaban was still with Shayne and Valdez. The Cuban smiled.

"Relax, Yankees. There is much time. Maybe an hour, maybe two. I think about it. We must be careful here, yes? Ah, to kill the enemy here in his own country, that is a skill. There must be no—how you say—?"

"Evidence?" Shayne said drily.

"*Si,* yes! No dead man to find, no? There are many leetle things to know. But you will see. There is time. I go out now to eat. You hongry?"

"No," Valdez said. The CIA man was pale, but he did not flinch.

"I'll take a sandwich," Shayne said.

Estaban laughed. "Good! You big brave gringo! Good!"

Laughing, the Cuban went out. Shayne waited. He listened to the sounds of the three men outside.

Valdez turned to look at the redhead. Valdez, too, was listening to the sounds outside.

"Just the three of them, Shayne," Valdez said.

"Yes, just three," Shayne said. "You have any ideas where we are?"

"Somewhere in the Keys," Valdez said.

"A deserted Key," Shayne said. "There are quite a few of the Castro boys, and it's hard to hide in the Keys. On top of that, I think these boys are on Fidel's best team. They probably go back and forth. Which means a boat somewhere close."

"But only three here now," Valdez said.

"Unless they've got some more on the boat," Shayne said.

"Any good ideas?" Valdez said.

"I'm working on it," Shayne said. "Keep talking."

"Estaban isn't a pleasant type." Valdez said.

"Just talk and think," Shayne said.

"I'm thinking about Estaban," Valdez said.

"Don't," Shayne said.

"All right," Valdez said. "I'll think of some way out. Meanwhile, tell me about the whole mess. Arrellaga was the only one in the know about the spy with Contreras. Why?"

"Because the spy is special, very special," Shayne said.

"Very special?"

"Very special." Shayne said.

"Such as Contreras himself, or Luisa maybe?"

"Perhaps. Or maybe even more special," Shayne said. His grey eyes were flat as they looked at Valdez.

Valdez did not flinch. "Maybe me? Is that how special? A CIA man, a double agent?"

"It crossed my mind. Somebody is mighty anxious to remain unknown. The heat was getting too strong; it was narrowing down too much. The spy wanted safety, not a quick trip home to Cuba. The spy wants to remain unknown enough to kill his contact, to kill a very big man in Cuba—Arrellaga."

"That would put you in a hell of a spot, wouldn't it?" Valdez said. "I mean, if they kill you first you'll never know."

"That crossed my mind too," Shayne said. "Only they don't know who the spy is, right? That puts you in a hell of a spot if you're it, Valdez. I mean, you can't let Estaban and his playmates kill you now, can you? If you're it you've got to let them know and fast."

"Yes," Valdez said.

The two men became silent. They looked at each other. Shayne tried not to think about Valdez but he had to. For some reason, the spy did not want to be sent to Cuba. Valdez fitted that. Valdez was not Cuban. The CIA man would not want to be sent to Cuba; he would want to protect his position inside the CIA.

Valdez had been at The Paradise Motel. Only Valdez has seen the man run out—if a man *had* run out. Valdez had a good reason to kill Arrellaga. The only one of the five who really did have a good reason. The others were all Cuban, they would go home as heroes if they went home.

Shayne frowned. Something was moving in his mind, something not quite right. A hint, a piece of the puzzle that he could not quite grasp. It was in something he had said to himself.

He shook his head, trying to remember what moved elusively in a kind of haze in his brain.

It would not come.

And Shayne had no more time to think.

Footsteps came up on the porch of the shack and the outside door opened. Estaban stood there.

The small Cuban smiled like a

hungry shark, showing broken and blackened teeth.

"Ah," Estaban said, "now we take the little walk, yes?"

Shayne and Valdez said nothing.

Estaban grinned. "So? You do not want the small walk? It is not far, a simple walk. It will be good for you."

"It's the walk back that worries me," Shayne said drily.

Estaban laughed. "Do not worry, That will be very easy. Come!" Estaban turned, snapped an order in Spanish. "Raul, be ready! Jesus, come to release these pigs!"

One of the other two men entered the shack. He carried his rifle and a knife. He went behind Shayne and Valdez and deftly cut the ropes that bound them.

"Come," Estaban said.

Shayne and Valdez stood up and walked to the door. Estaban waited for them, his machine-gun held negligently with its muzzle down. Jesus came behind them with his rifle alert. They stepped out into the sun. Raul, the third man, waited at a careful distance with his machine-gun ready.

Shayne saw nothing but a stretch of open beach, palm trees all around the shack, and the sea stretching blue and empty. There was nothing and no one in sight. Estaban laughed.

"We are, how you say, by ourselves?" Estaban said.

"Surprise," Shayne said.

Estaban roared. "I like. You funny gringo. Very funny. Now you walk, funny man."

Shayne and Valdez began to walk. They were marched away from the sea through the palm trees toward a line of tall sand dunes some distance away inland. When they reached the line of dunes they were marched over the high hillocks. At the top of the dunes Shayne saw what he had expected.

A low, black cabin cruiser lay hidden under thick palm trees in a narrow, sheltered cove. The boat could not be seen from anywhere on the ground, and was covered from observation from above. The entrance to the small cove was closed in by a man-made screen of palm leaves and bushes.

Shayne and Valdez were marched down to the boat.

X

THE BLACK BOAT cruised slowly over the placid surface of the inland waterway.

They were cruising carefully among the small islands, the points and spits of land. All the land was low and heavily overgrown. At first, after leaving the hidden cove and turning not out to sea but inland among the narrow inlets and arms of the sea, they had passed no signs of life. Then they had begun to pass isolated shacks and cabins, a few larger homes.

Shayne and Valdez had looked at each other. But Raul and Jesus

watched them closely; they had no chance to signal or hope for help. Estaban was at the wheel, watching the water very closely, and now the black boat moved again through a deserted area among the tiny islands and sluggish waterways.

Estaban seemed to be looking for something specific. The small Cuban studied the surface of the water in the narrow inlets. His sharp black eyes watched the land on either side. Shayne sat on the floorboards in the waist of the boat and watched Estaban. The Cuban was clearly looking for some place, searching for landmarks.

Shayne decided that what Estaban was looking for was an exact spot for his killing. For some reason the Cuban wanted to do his job at a special place in this silent complex of inland islands and waterways.

Shayne noted the way Estaban studied the land in search for guideposts to his spot.

Shayne also noted the way Estaban looked down at the water.

There was something about the water that Estaban studied. The currents! Shayne guessed that it had to be the currents. The movement of the water through these tidal inlets that would carry a body far from this spot, probably all the way out on the other side into the Gulf of Mexico.

No evidence, that was what Estaban had said. And a missing body was the best way of leaving no evidence. Estaban was looking for a spot that he knew: a spot where the bodies of his victims would be carried away and out into the Gulf and probably never found!

And the spot could not be far now.

Shayne let his grey eyes look casually at Valdez. He nodded imperceptibly. Valdez blinked. The CIA man understood. Soon they would have to make their move if either one was to make any move at all.

Shayne watched the trees on the shore. From where he sat he could not see the shore itself, only the trees high up at the top. Then, even as he watched, he began to see more of the trees. The boat was passing close in to shore.

Estaban had found his spot.

The small Cuban cut the motor, peered once more over the side and ahead to be sure of his spot.

Raul, standing just above Shayne in the open cockpit of the black boat, pointed to the shore with his machine-gun.

Jesus, at the stern with his rifle, looked toward the distant far shore of the silent tidal inlet.

For a split second no one was watching Shayne and Valdez.

Shayne moved.

He leaped up, his muscles gathered for the supreme effort. He was on his feet and smashing against Raul in the same motion. Raul staggered, his gun clattering to the floorboards.

Jesus, at the stern, swung his rifle to Shayne.

Valdez jumped on Jesus and with a diving blow knocked the smaller man down.

At the wheel, Estaban clawed for his weapon.

The boat, its engine cut, drifted ahead on a strong current.

Raul was bending for his gun. Jesus crawled along the deck after his rifle. Estaban almost had his gun out.

Shayne did not wait.

The big red-head went over the side and down into the dark inland water in a frantic dive. The last he saw before he hit the water was Valdez going over the other side in a wild leap, and Estaban running back from the wheel with his pistol aimed. The pistol seemed to fire as Shayne looked. He felt a sharp burning in his side. But he seemed to hear no sound and then he was in the water.

The water closed over the red-head. He went down and down. The inlet was deceptively deep. The water was dark and murky. His side burned but the wound was minor. Streaks of white, long pencils of bubbles, told Shayne that he was still being fired at. His side was bleeding.

He held his breath and ripped at his side to make it bleed more. He let the strong current carry him.

He did not know which way to swim, but the current would know, and he felt it pulling him power-

fully along. Estaban had picked the spot for this strong current, and now Shayne would use it. He estimated that it was carrying him along under the water at a rate of thirty or so miles an hour—a rip tide current.

But he could not hold his breath much longer.

The black boat had been drifting. But Estaban would have started the engine at once, and the boat was probably cruising now in the direction of the current. Estaban knew the speed of the rip.

Shayne had to surface.

Under the water he searched for any cover. Luck was with him. Just as he knew he could stay down no longer he saw a dark shadow. It was the thick roots of a mangrove. Mike Shayne swam for the roots with his last strength. He swam through them and behind them and forced his straining lungs to come up slowly behind the tree.

He came up in deep shadow.

The branches of the low mangroves spread above him.

It was a tiny islet out in the tidewater inlet. All trees and mud. Shayne was deep inside the ring of heavy roots in the dark shadow.

He saw the black boat.

It was fifty yards away, going slowly along with the current. Estaban stood high on the bow, his gun ready, his dark eyes searching water. His face was black with anger—and under the anger a certain fear. Estaban was thinking about what he would tell the soft-voiced man who had sat behind the light.

"There was blood," Raul called to Estaban.

Jesus was at the wheel.

"Yes, there was blood," Estaban said. "I hit him."

"I hit the other," Jesus said from the wheel.

Estaban continued to search the empty water.

"They could not stay down so long," Raul said.

"It is not possible," Jesus said.

Estaban said nothing. He stood high on the foredeck and searched every inch of the empty water.

"The blood, there was much. He was hit bad," Jesus said.

"And the other. I saw Jesus shoot him. He sank like a stone. He could not swim so wounded."

"They are dead," Jesus said.

"Of a certainty," Raul said.

"The current it will carry them to the Gulf."

"The bodies will not be found."

"Perhaps the roots will get them."

"They are dead," Raul said.

Estaban slowly let his eyes make a wide circle. The boat drifted on away from where Shayne hid. Estaban lowered his gun.

"Yes," Estaban said. "They are dead. We are all witnesses to their deaths. Their bodies will not be found. Our work has been done."

"Yes," Raul said.

"*Si*, yes," Jesus said.

Estaban watched the other two. "That is my report, yes? You will so report with me? We do not need to mention how they died. It would not be important. We will say that we killed them as usual."

Raul nodded. "We dropped their bodies into the water at the usual spot."

"We saw them sink into the current," Jesus said.

Estaban came down from the bow. "Good. But I think we go on perhaps some greater distance. I would like to find their bodies."

"Of course," Raul and Jesus said at once.

The black boat went on slowly with the three men still watching the water and both shores. They had their story, but they would look as long as they could anyway.

Shayne watched the boat go on and out of sight. But it would come back the same way. This time Estaban might think about the mangrove islet. The small Cuban killer had no desire to let his chief know that he had failed, but he was also an expert killer and would try to be sure before he returned with his lie.

Shayne waited another few mo-

ments, and then slipped out from behind the dark mangroves.

He had already checked the shores. One was low and grassy with palms and thick mangroves in spots. The other was higher and choked with heavy growth at the edge of the water. Shayne swam to the low, grassy shore. Estaban would expect him to hide on the more dense shore.

He reached the land and stumbled from the water. He rested in the shade of a bush, his eyes watching for the return of the black boat. After a time he got up and moved into the deeper shadows. The boat had not returned. He waited.

The sun was moving down the sky. Still the black boat did not return.

Shayne wondered about Valdez. Was the CIA man dead? It was hard to tell. They had lied to themselves about him; they could be lying about Valdez. On the other hand Jesus could have been right; he could have killed Valdez.

Shayne waited. The boat could not search for long or the soft-voiced chief would know that it had been gone too long and that something had gone wrong.

To prove Shayne right, the black boat suddenly appeared again. It was moving as fast as it could now against the rip tide of the inlet. Shayne watched as Estaban pointed to the islet where he had first hidden. The boat swung in and Estaban searched the shadows.

Shayne watched.

Estaban stood up and looked at both shores. The small Cuban said something to Raul on the wheel, and the black boat swung close to the overgrown shore on the opposite side of the inlet from where Shayne hid. Shayne smiled.

The black boat went on and vanished again.

Shayne looked up at the sun. He calculated the direction of the shack where he had been first held. It would not be easy, he would certainly have to swim more than once, but he was going back to the shack and the soft-voiced man behind the light.

He had a score to settle now and a spy to find, and he had a hunch that the soft-voiced man had gone to find the identity of the spy.

XI

MIKE SHAYNE had to swim five times, once for almost a mile across a wide arm of the open sea. He had to stumble through mangrove swamps, dense brush on the deserted islets, and long stretches of open sand and shallow tidal flats. He reached the arm of the mainland that was his goal just an hour after darkness had settled over the land of sand and water.

Where the hidden cove was, and the shack, Shayne saw, was an arm of land that was almost an island. Little more than a sandspit, it was connected to the mainland by a

narrow piece of sand supported by invisible man-made log supports on either side. On the maps it was undoubtedly listed as a deserted and uninhabitable island.

Who would be suspicious of an empty beach shack, far out on a deserted island, as a headquarters for Cuban agents?

But the shack was there, and the black boat was hidden in its cove. Shayne crept close and saw that the boat was bobbing silent and dark on the quiet water of its hidden cove. There was no guard. They felt that safe.

Shayne crept aboard the black boat and went cautiously below. He found all the cabins silent and empty—and he found what he wanted. He found guns. They were in a locked cabinet. Shayne opened the cabinet by breaking the lock. He took an automatic carbine, small and deadly; and a .38 revolver. He took five extra clips for the carbine, and a pocketful of ammunition for the .38.

On land again he moved swiftly but silently through the dark. He moved like a wraith, incredibly quiet and agile for such a big man. He went over the line of high dunes and across the arm of land to the grove of palm trees near the shack. The shack was lighted, light streaming into the night from all four windows. Both cars were back parked in the sand at the end of the narrow dirt road.

Shayne went down on his belly and crawled from the shelter of the palm grove to a stand of tough beach bushes near the shack. In the clump of bushes he raised on one knee and studied the shack. He was looking for guards.

There was noise from the shack, the sound of much talk, but the Cubans knew their trade.

Shayne saw one guard in the shadow of the porch.

He waited. Another guard appeared walking a perimeter about twenty feet from the house at the edge of the first row of dense bushes. This guard made no sound as he stepped carefully in the sand. From time to time, at irregular intervals, the walking guard stopped to watch and listen.

These were the only guards. Shayne circled the house very carefully to be sure. Then he planned his moves. There was a window at the rear of the shack that was out of sight to the guard on the porch. The window was the only one low enough for a man to see into the shack through.

Shayne guessed that the Cubans considered one perimeter guard, and one man on the entrance of the shack, to be enough because they had men up the road to warn of anyone approaching from the mainland.

It was another piece of luck for Shayne, though. He only had to dispose of the perimeter guard.

In the bushes he waited.

The guard appeared, walking

silent in the sand. The guard was alert, but not as alert as he should have been. The day had been long, and the isolation of the shack and the sandspit of land made the guard more secure than he should have been in the kind of work the Cubans were doing. And success had lulled the guard, Shayne could see it. For a spy or a counterspy, success was deadly. It blunted the nerves, brought on a confidence that had killed more agents than any other enemy.

The guard came abreast of where Shayne crouched hidden.

The red-head rose up like a phantom of the night. The guard reacted a full second too late. Shayne's big hands closed on his throat and mouth. The man struggled like a fish on a hook. Shayne squeezed until the man went limp.

He laid the man in the sand in the shadow of the bushes. A stray beam of silver light crossed the man's face—it was Jesus! Shayne bound and gagged the unconscious Cuban, stripped him of his weapon, and dragged him into the center of a thick clump of tough beach growth.

Shayne crawled out onto the open sand, worked his way across to the bushes near the shack. He crawled close under the pilings and walls until he came to the window that was low enough to see through. His weapons ready, he raised up and peered in the window. The room of the shack was bright with

light now. The scene made him narrow his grey eyes as he watched.

They were all gathered around the bare wood table. He saw Estaban and Raul. There were the other men whose names he did not know. The small man who had been the leader of the four who had captured Shayne and Valdez was talking as Shayne watched. This man was talking to a tall, thin man.

Mike Shayne studied the tall, thin man. He looked at the pale, soft hands with the large signet ring. It was the soft-voiced man from behind the light.

The leader of the Cubans was a delicate-featured man with a pale, aristocratic face. He had a pencil-thin mustache. His eyes were blue —cold and deadly blue. He was dressed in an impeccable business suit, and his soft fingers were picking among a small pile of objects

on the bare table. Now he was listening to the small man, who was clearly his second-in-command.

"I see nothing to tell us," the small Cuban said.

"Perhaps not, but I am sure it is here, Echerra," the tall leader said. "This is the entire contents of the safe in Director Arrellaga's special office. It would be where he kept all his important material. Also, Echerra, it was his drop. The spy in the Contreras Battalion would have used the drop to transmit his information.

"Director Arrellaga was engaged that night in a special project, as he told me. I remember it made him laugh. He said to me that there were many uses to any single situation. He said he was making the final use of one of his best projects. He was amused and most pleased."

The small Echerra shrugged. "But this, all this material, Supervisor Ortega, what does it mean? I see nothing here of any importance."

Ortega frowned. "It is here, Echerra, but we must learn to read it."

Echerra picked through the small pile of objects on the bare table. "Money, two pistols, the key to a safety deposit box, a list of counter-revolutionary agents in Cuba. What does this tell us?"

Ortega stared down at the table. "Here is a note that tells that Shayne was an agent for the Americans. We know then that Director Arrellaga knew about Shayne. The note that Shayne spoke of was undoubtedly from Arrellaga to the agent in the Contreras Battalion. It was intended to bring a meeting to discuss this Shayne."

"But Supervisor, what is special about the resident director discussing a counter-espionage agent with our spy?" Echerra said.

Ortega paced the floor of the shack. "Nothing! It would have been routine! No, Director Arrellaga had more on his mind. Something very special, something he was killed to stop! We must know what it is! The murder of Arrellaga is bad, yes, but even Director Arrellaga was unimportant, he can be replaced. What is more important is why he was killed! We must know. Until we know there is some danger to our cause we are unaware of!"

Echerra stirred the remaining objects on the table. "I was sure the clue would be here in the director's book of agents." Echerra held a small black notebook. "But there is no agent listed in the Contreras Battalion."

"This agent is very special," Ortega said, his thin face showing a certain grimness now. "We know that. But there must be some clue to his identity. Shayne told us that Director Arrellaga was searched. The murderer was looking for something!"

Echerra picked over the last

objects. "A ring of diamonds. A dagger. A miniature camera in which the film has not been used! Some microfilms of old reports we have already had reported to Cuba. Some prints of meetings of the Contreras Battalion leaders. A single negative of one of those prints. I do not understand."

Ortega held the prints. He studied the photographs and the single negative. "They were made with a miniature camera, probably the one Arrellaga had. But what do they tell us? They show Contreras, the girl Luisa, the killer Yague, Pedro Vargas, Valdez, and the American agent Cummings. What is that? They show nothing we do not know."

"The negative is a poor negative. There could be no print," Echerra said. "Why should the director keep such a negative in the safe?"

Ortega paced the room. "I do not know! There must be some answer."

At the window Shayne listened to it all. Echerra and Ortega were so concerned with their problem, the others so worried, that no one had glanced once at the windows. They had forgotten who and where they were. But Shayne had not. Soon the perimeter guard would be missed. It was only luck that the guard on the porch had not missed Jesus yet.

But this was not what was on Shayne's mind. It was the identity of the agent that was on his mind. His grey eyes were as cold as points of steel. An impossible thought had come to him. He had to get his hands on those prints and that single negative!

He had to create some diversion, get them out of the shack long enough to pick up the prints and negative.

He had no chance.

The door of the shack opened now, and the guard on the porch stepped in. He spoked in rapid Spanish.

"Jesus has not come around! He should have been around!"

Ortega stopped pacing. "Jesus?"

"On the perimeter, Supervisor Ortega! Jesus circles this building. He has not come around for ten minutes!"

Echerra swore. "Ten minutes! You extreme idiot! Find him!"

Ortega snapped orders. They did not think of the window. Estaban led all the men out of the room into the night. They ran out. Shayne did not hesitate.

The red-head vaulted through the window into the room. He strode quickly to the table and swept up the prints and the single negative. He turned to return to the window and the night. At the window he stopped.

Flashlights probed the night outside. Men combed the entire open area around the shack. There was a shout. They had found the bound and gagged Jesus. Shayne crouched

inside at the window waiting for his chance. When they left the area directly behind the window he would have to jump out and see if he could make a run for it. He tensed for his leap.

The voice swore in Spanish behind him.

Shayne whirled.

Estaban stood there with his machine-gun in his hands. The small Cuban killer was pale as he stared at the man he had reported killed.

XII

ESTABAN held his gun, but did not fire at once. His black eyes showed a terrified mixture of fear and hate. For an instant the two men stared straight at each other. The second of hesitation cost Estaban.

Shayne raised his hand with the .38 caliber pistol in it and shot, a hair before Estaban squeezed the trigger.

Shayne's shot was deadly accurate.

Estaban staggered, fell backwards.

The burst from his machine-gun ripped into the ceiling of the shack. His dying finger clamped on the trigger and the gun fired a long, endless burst into the roof.

Then the gun went silent. Estaban lay with his dead eyes staring up at nothing.

Outside the Cubans shouted. To a man they raced for the door of the shack.

Shayne went out the window.

He landed in the sand, already running. He tore across the dark open space of sand toward the line of trees and bushes. He had a plan. If he could evade them long enough to reach the black boat he had a chance to escape.

Behind him, in the shack, Ortega's voice cursed in violent Spanish. He had seen the open window, and found that all the Cubans had run for the shack. The tall supervisor raged at this stupidity.

Shayne ran on.

Behind him they poured from the shack and raced in hot pursuit.

Shayne crashed through the heavy brush. Twice the tough growth caught his feet and tripped him sprawling in the sand. From the sounds behind him the Cubans were having the same trouble with the tough bushes. Shayne picked himself up and staggered on. The wound in his side opened again. He could feel the blood wet and warm under his shirt.

He reached the line of high dunes and stumbled up and over. He slipped on the down slope and rolled all the way to the bottom. Stunned, he lay there for a second. But he had no time to be stunned, no time to lie in the sand. He struggled up, shaking his head to clear, clutching his side that burned again with the blood under his shirt.

He stumbled on across the sand and under the palm trees to the hidden cove where the black boat bobbed silent at its mooring.

There were shouts behind him. "The boat!"

"Head him off!"

"He's almost there, you fools!"

"Quick!"

The Cubans poured down the slope toward where Shayne had nearly reached the black boat. They slipped and sprawled in the sand in their anxiety to catch him. They floundered like fish in a slippery net. But they came on. Some began to fire.

Shayne reached the hidden cove.

"Shayne! Down!"

The voice called from the dark in front of him. From the palm trees thick around the hidden cove. It was a voice Shayne knew but could not for the instant place.

"Down, Shayne!"

Shayne went down flat on his belly.

A withering fire poured from all the darkness of the trees all around the cover.

The Cubans, caught in the hail of fire, screamed. Some fell. Others dove for cover. But there was little cover on the slope of the dunes and blood began to stain the sand.

"Back!" Ortega cried.

The Cubans stumbled back up the dunes and dived over into the safety of the reverse slope.

Men ran from the dark shadows of the palm trees in chase of the fleeing Cubans. But the Cubans had gained some cover by now, and the battle settled into two lines of heavy fire. Shayne, behind the men who had saved him now where he lay in the sand, crawled into the cover of a palm tree and struggled up. He sat against the palm, breathing heavily.

A man emerged from the night and stood over him.

"Well, it looks like I got here just in time," the man said.

And Shayne knew the voice now. The man was small and stocky with iron grey hair. He wore civilian clothes now, but Shayne smiled as he recognized Colonel Moran, the Army's chief liaison officer in Miami with the anti-Castro Cubans. Moran squatted down and smiled at the redhead.

"You look like you needed help," Moran said.

Shayne nodded. "I needed a lot of help. You made it like the Marines to the rescue. How did you get here?"

"Spotted Ortega and followed him. He lost us back a way, but we picked up the trail," Moran said. "I was almost too late."

"Almost is all right," Shayne said. "Who's with you?"

"Just ten of my men. Good men, even though most of them are clerks now," Moran said.

"Cummings and Valdez aren't here?"

"No. I don't know where Valdez

is, haven't seen him for over a day," Moran said.

"Colonel Josephs?" Shayne asked.

Moran smiled. "Josephs is a Washington desk man. No, I just have my boys, but they should be enough. I've been after Ortega for a long time. He's Arrellaga's chief. Or he was. They found Arrellaga dead in a motel. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you? Valdez seems to have vanished about the same time."

Shayne nodded. "I know about it. We were captured in that motel by Ortega's men. They thought one of us, Valdez or I, had killed Arrellaga."

"Did you?" Moran asked.

"No. He was dead when we got there. Or, at least, he was dead when I got there."

"You're not sure about Valdez?" Moran said.

"No," Shayne said.

Moran rubbed his chin. "It's hard to believe that the spy could be Valdez, but I've seen stranger things."

"Yes," Shayne said.

Moran seemed to look out toward where the firing had moved away in the direction of the shack on the beach. "Did you find anything to give us a lead to the spy? Or to the killer?"

"Not in the motel," Shayne said.

Moran nodded. The grey-haired colonel stood up. "It's a messy business, Shayne. We better get over and see how my boys are doing. Can you walk?"

Shayne nodded and struggled up, holding his side. "I can walk. You lead."

Shayne followed the stocky colonel through the night back over the high line of dunes again. Two Cubans lay where they had been shot. The stocky colonel walked ahead in his civilian clothes and did not even glance at the two dead Cubans. Shayne looked at them. Neither was Ortega or Echerra or Raul.

Moran moved rapidly down the other side of the dunes and through the thick underbrush toward where the firing was still heavy. The Cubans appeared to be holding out strongly. Moran and Shayne reached the line of palms that surrounded the shack on the land side. The Cubans were dug down in the underbrush around the shack.

"You ought to take them alive, Moran," Shayne said.

"If we can, Shayne," the colonel said soberly. "They don't look like they intend to go quietly."

"No, but maybe if you offered them—" Shayne stopped. The redhead stared off into the night. "Look!"

On the open beach beyond the shack, to the rear of the Cubans, shadowy figures were moving swiftly and silently along the beach. There were many of them. They carried weapons and made no sound as they moved in.

"Your men?" Shayne snapped to Moran.

"No," Moran said. "I didn't tell anyone else where I was going."

"Could they be Cuban?"

"I don't see how. These men have been clever, but you can't hide an army down here."

Shayne stared ahead into the night. He watched the strange men, perhaps eight of them, moving rapidly up on the shack. They reached the shack. The Cubans saw them too late. There was a sudden cease in the firing from the Cubans.

Caught in a vise between the two groups of enemies, the Cuban leader, Ortega, seemed to hesitate. Then Shayne saw the figure of the tall man stand up. The others stood up. There were only four left to stand. Ortega raised his hands. His men did the same. The newcomers moved in.

Moran's men moved in warily from their cover in the line of trees in the dark night. Shayne and Moran walked behind the grey-haired colonel's men. The newcomers had already disarmed the Cubans. Shayne and Moran walked to the newcomers. Shayne smiled as he saw the two leaders of the newcomers. One was Valdez.

"I thought they got you, Shayne," Valdez said.

"I was afraid they'd gotten you," Shayne said.

"I made it underwater to shore. They never even nicked me," Valdez said. "I reached a piece of the

mainland and went for help. It seemed the best thing."

"I'm glad you did," Shayne said.

Moran was talking to the other leader of the newcomers. It was the CIA agent Cummings. The American soldiers and CIA men were taking the weapons of the Cubans. Ortega stood silent but his eyes stared hard at Shayne.

"So, Estaban failed and lied," Ortega said. "You are a lucky man, Shayne."

"And you're unlucky. Did you learn anything from Arrellaga's hideout?"

"That is for me to know," Ortega said.

"You'll talk to us, Ortega," Cummings said. "We've wanted you for a long time."

Colonel Moran turned to the shack. "I'll check inside to see what I can find."

The colonel walked off and up the steps of the porch into the shack. Cummings nodded to Shayne.

"Good work, Mike. We've finished Arrellaga and Ortega and his

gang. This is a hell of a good hideout. You did a good job."

"I think I can do better," Shayne said. "Valdez, did you know where Arrellaga had his secret headquarters in Miami?"

"No one knew that, Shayne," Valdez said.

"That's what I figured," Shayne said grimly. "Come on."

Shayne turned and walked toward the shack. Valdez and Cummings followed.

Shayne went up the steps of the porch silently. He motioned for Valdez and Cummings to be very quiet.

They reached a window and looked in.

XIII

IN THE SHACK Colonel Moran was bent over the bare table. The grey-haired colonel was searching through the objects from Arrellaga's safe that Ortega and his men had left there when they pursued Shayne.

Moran's fingers pawed frantically. The stocky colonel swore. He threw aside the pistols and the black book. He looked for a time at the miniature camera. He swore again and stood straight up as he looked down at the table. He did not hear Shayne and the others until they were in the room.

Moran whirled, his hand going toward his coat. When he saw who it was he stopped the motion of reaching for his pistol and smiled.

"Nothing here," Moran said. His eyes were flat. He looked at the three men who came into the room.

Shayne looked down at the table. "Are you looking for something special, Colonel?" the redhead asked.

Moran shrugged. "Just anything that might be important. That is my job, Shayne."

"One of your jobs, you mean, Colonel?" Shayne said softly.

Moran stiffened. "What the hell does—"

Shayne tugged slowly on his left earlobe. "You know, one thing bothered me all along. Why would a Cuban agent planted with Contreras kill Arrellaga? I mean, any Cuban would go home a hero. There wouldn't be any reason to kill Arrellaga. Then there was that note I found.

"It was very careless of a spy to leave it around like that for me to find. Even Valdez found it, didn't you, Valdez?" Shayne looked hard at the CIA agent.

"I found it."

Shayne nodded. "And assumed that it was for the spy in the Contreras Battalion. Yes, so did I. But I don't think it was. I think it was for *me*! It was put there for me to find. Probably by Arrellaga himself. It was part of his special project."

Cummings said, "Special project?"

"Yes," Shayne said. "Arrellaga

had a special project going that night. It was amusing to him, according to Ortega. I can't see any reason for Ortega to lie to me about it. No, I think that Arrellaga left that note to lure me to the Paradise Motel. I don't think there ever was a spy in the Contreras Battalion. Not a key man, anyway. A paid lackey, probably. Arrellaga, good as he was, couldn't have got into the Battalion headquarters personally."

"Then we'll never know who it was," Moran said.

Shayne shook his head. "I think we will, and soon. The poor devil who was bribed or threatened to plant the note for Arrellaga is a very scared man right now, or will be as soon as he hears of his chief's death. He knows he will be hunted down eventually." The red-head lit a cigarette, stared intently at the ceiling.

"That's it. You'll have a desertion some day soon. That will be the man who planted that note where I had to find it."

"How do you figure there is no spy?" Moran asked.

"Well, none of the four Cubans are so special that Arrellaga would keep their names strictly to himself. None of them would insist on that. Oh, Contreras himself wouldn't want it known too far, but it would be okay for Arrellaga's superiors to know. Valdez might have wanted it that way. Being a double agent is dangerous. But if it was Valdez I don't think he would have come back tonight."

Valdez swore. "But, damn it, Shayne, I told you that only five people knew of that last raid! Just the five of us in the Battalion, not counting the five on the raid who were killed! It has to be one of the five!"

"No," Shayne said. "There were six who knew about that raid."

Cummings blinked. "Six? I don't see—"

"Colonel Moran knew," Shayne said quietly.

Moran laughed aloud. Valdez and Cummings looked at Moran and then at Shayne. The colonel took out a cigarette and lighted it. He blew smoke into the silent room.

"You have quite an imagination, Shayne," Moran said.

"You knew," Shayne said. "You knew about everything that happened in the Contreras Battalion. You knew all the plans of all the anti-Castro groups. A really fine spot for a double agent. That's what you are, right? That's your other job—you're an agent for Castro."

"You're not being funny any more, Shayne," Moran said.

"I figure you're an agent for anyone who will pay you. I imagine we'll find secret money if we look hard," Shayne said.

"I'm tired of this!" Moran said, blew smoke. The colonel started for the door.

Shayne blocked his path. "How did you get here tonight, Moran? You said you spotted Ortega and trailed him."

"I did, damn it!" Moran snarled.

"I'm sure you did," Shayne said. "Only Ortega went to the secret headquarters of Arrellaga. How did you know where those headquarters were? How come you were there to see Ortega?"

"Everyone knew—" Moran began.

Cummings shook his head slowly. "No, Colonel, we didn't know. And if you knew you never told us. You were there."

"And in civilian clothes," Valdez said. "You always wear your uniform on duty."

"This is ridiculous!" Moran roared. The grey-haired colonel glared around. "That proves nothing!"

Shayne agreed. "It proves little, but taken with some more it's helpful. Arrellaga knew about me. No one in Contreras's Battalion could have told him for sure. Then there's the killing of Arrellaga. You would have a real reason, Colonel. I think he was going to expose you!"

There was a silence. Shayne shrugged. "I think that was his special project, to expose you. We were getting too close. You were getting nervous. You wouldn't be much more use to Arrellaga. I imagine you wanted to lay low. Arrellaga saw a fine chance to really make the United States look bad. One of their own colonels a Cuban agent! No wonder he laughed. I think he called me to the Paradise Motel to turn you in!!"

This time the silence was long and heavy. Valdez and Cummings were watching Moran. The stocky colonel licked his lips, blew smoke. He smiled, but his eyes were not smiling.

"All guesses, Shayne," Moran said.

"True," Mike Shayne said. "Just guesses and hints. But I think that this was what you were looking for on that table."

Shayne held out the prints and the single negative. Moran looked at them. Valdez took them and studied them. Cummings looked at them over the shoulder of Valdez. Both Cummings and Valdez were puzzled when they looked up at Shayne.

"What are these, Shayne?" Valdez said. "The negative is useless, defective. The prints show one of the meetings we had with Contreras and his staff."

Cummings said, "They don't show anything, Mike. The photos are just of a meeting we all had. I can't see anything that incriminates anyone."

Moran said nothing. The grey-haired colonel stood very still. He smoked. His hands held the cigarette chest high as he looked not at the pictures but closely at Mike Shayne.

"No, you can't see anything,"

Shayne said. "That's the important thing. It's what you don't see that counts."

"Don't see?" Valdez said.

"Who took the pictures," Shayne said.

"What?" Cummings said.

"Someone took those pictures with a miniature camera. You said it was a meeting of the Contreras staff, plus, obviously, the Americans involved."

Valdez stared at the pictures. "A secret meeting!"

"Who else was at the meeting?" Shayne said.

Cummings looked at the Colonel. "Moran was there, of course. He is in charge of liaison. He was always there."

"Only Moran?" Shayne said. "Besides those in the photos?"

"Only Moran," Valdez said softly.

Shayne nodded. "Yeh, that's what I thought. So Moran took those pictures—and Arrellaga had them!"

Moran was white. The colonel blustered, "Arrellaga and his agents stole them from me!"

Shayne held up the negative. "No, and this is the final proof. It's a useless negative. Why did Arrellaga keep it? I figure you know, Moran. I figure this is what you want real bad. Bad enough to kill for. Arrellaga had a hunch. He didn't have the pictures or the negative with him. He was probably going to tell me about you, and give me the proof later. This negative is the real proof."

Moran moved fast, so fast they barely saw his hand drop the cigarette and snake into his coat. But not fast enough. The colonel's hand came out with his pistol in it, but it never aimed the pistol. Shayne and Valdez moved as one man.

Valdez was a hair faster.

The CIA agent grabbed Moran's gun hand.

Moran struggled, his knee kicked up into Valdez's groin.

Valdez let go.

Shayne was there and hit Moran once on the chin.

Moran went down. Cummings picked up the pistol that fell from his hand. Valdez sat on a chair, his teeth set against the pain of Moran's kick. Shayne stood over the colonel. Moran lay there. Then Moran sat up slowly, his eyes glazed with hate.

"I gave him all he wanted. He paid me. He paid through the nose! I'm a rich man! I made him pay me. He had to pay anything I asked; he never had such a source! But when I told him it was getting too hot he was going to turn me in! I guessed what he was up to! I have some connections. I found out about the Paradise Motel. I went there. He laughed at me!"

Moran laughed on the floor of the shack. "But I laughed last. He wasn't going to ruin me! I was rich. I could retire. No, he made a big

mistake. I killed him right there. But he didn't have those photos or the negative. I looked. Then Shayne showed up. I should have killed Shayne, but I didn't know who else was outside."

Moran's eyes were bright as he looked up. "I was right, too. Valdez was out there. So I got away and then I watched the Cubans take you both. I couldn't follow, but I watched Arrellaga's secret hideout until Ortega showed up."

Moran looked up at them. "It was perfect. Who would ever suspect me? I'm rich, you hear? I can buy and sell you all! I can retire a rich man! But he had to trap me! That bastard Arrellaga! I never realized what those photos showed about me. He asked me to get them, I never did know why! Then when we developed them he said one was no good and handed it to me! I took it! I never knew he didn't destroy it!"

Moran was suddenly silent, a silence of hate and fury for Arrellaga.

Mike Shayne nodded.

"The photos proved Moran was a traitor," Shayne said. "The negative was a bonus. Moran took it when it was wet. It's no good, but it does show the meeting, and it's got his fingerprints on it! That'll cook him."

Moran looked up. "It was perfect! No one would ever suspect me! Not even with that special raid. But that was getting too close. I had to get out. After all, I'm rich. Don't you see."

Shayne looked down at the colonel. Then he turned on his heel.

"You handle him now," Shayne said. "I feel sick!"

The red-head turned and walked out of the shack into the night. He saw the tall Cuban, Ortega, still standing with his hands up among his men.

Shayne looked at Ortega as he passed. Ortega had tried to kill him. But at least Ortega fought his own way for his own cause.

Moran had no cause.

Shayne walked on in the night. He was thinking of all the men Moran had gotten killed. It would be dawn soon. Mike Shayne was not sure he wanted to see the dawn in a world that made Colonel Moran!

A NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL NEXT ISSUE

The Missing Body

"You can't have the money," she said. "not for five years, or while I live." Five years was too long . . .

by ARTHUR PORGES

FOR THE first time in thirty years, a man was studying Norma Vining's body with real interest. Unfortunately, the examiner was her nephew, Howard

Talbot, who was motivated solely by a desire to dispose of her ninety-eight pounds of tough, scrawny, wrinkled, and obstructive flesh in such a place and in such a manner that they would remain undiscovered for a few days, no matter how hard the police hunted.

"Why are you staring?" she demanded suddenly, looking up from her knitting.

"I was just marveling at how vigorous and well-preserved you are for your age," he said, which was part of the truth. In fact, he had been telling himself gloomily that Aunt Norma might easily last another twenty years, reaching eighty-three as bouncy as ever.

"Huh!" she snorted. "More likely you were wondering how many more years I'd be around to keep you from making a fool of yourself and wasting Mabel's money."

"I was not," he objected. "But I still say it's an unfair set-up. I'll be thirty in a few months. Look how long I've had to wait for Ma's money."

"You may have to wait longer," she snapped. "I promised her to take care of you. 'If he's not ready at thirty,' Mabel said, 'you'll have the right to guide him five more years.' It's in the will."

He gulped, the color draining from his face. So here it was, out in the open at last, after all her veiled warnings. The old witch was actually going to use that terrible option, and keep him dangling until he was thirty-five—an empty shell; a senior citizen! Well, he might have expected it. There had been hints enough. If only a safe way could be found, he'd fix her.

"You wouldn't make me wait," he said, certain that she would.

"My generation," she told him firmly, "unlike yours, believes in duty. The truth is, Howard, you're still a child in many ways. You've failed at several professions. You insisted on studying art, the most useless of all fields, and after spending a fortune on the best teachers, refused to earn a living, although you had adequate training and competence. Why such an absurd prejudice against business, I'll never understand."

"Commercial art," he began, exasperated, "is hardly a creative career for anybody with talent, and—"

She cut him off. "It was the only kind you were fitted for. That's what Moreau and Harper and Bordoni all told me. Then you tried selling stock, and sold exactly fifty shares in one year—to me! And I had to select it, over your protests; you favored some worthless stuff that's now so much paper.

"Then you wanted to design modern furniture, and turned out

some grotesque things an octopus couldn't sit in without cramps. And finally," she went on inexorably, "you set out to be a journalist, but since you can't write grammatical sentences or even spell—after five years of college—that didn't work, either."

She fixed pale eyes on him in a basilisk stare. "It's a bad business. Tell me just how can I, in good conscience, do my duty to Mabel by handing over almost half a million dollars to such an immature and foolish young man?"

"I'll go back to commercial art," he said in desperation. "I promise."

"And after I turn over the money, you'll quit like a flash. Don't you think I know that—and you?"

It was hopeless, he knew. Her mouth was pursy and bluish now. When Aunt Norma made up her mind, a dry soda cracker was flexible by comparison. She'd make her verbal declaration to the trust officials, and he'd be barred from his inheritance for another five years. Unless she died or disappeared before his birthday, just nine weeks away.

There must be a way, he told himself fiercely. I have plenty of imagination, and skilled hands, too. Surely I can get rid of this intolerable old woman.

He thought about it for days, and came to certain key conclusions. The body, if he got that far, must be hidden on his own property, so that after the search there was abandoned, he would be safe from any later discovery by chance.

But the obvious solution, burial, was clearly out. There were fifty acres, but most of them were shallow dirt over rock, and the few parts that weren't would be probed inch by inch, if he understood police methods. No, he must make it plain first that he couldn't have taken the remains off the ranch, and second, that they were not on it. Then, after all that, bury her deep in some corner, safe in the knowledge that nobody would ever look there again.

It was all quite clear and simple, except that he had no answer yet to the critical question: where to hide her during that first stage?

He prowled the ranch restlessly, eyes and ears alert, hoping to think of a hiding place. He could work privately. That was one advantage. In their own little valley, with trees on three sides, he would not be overseen, barring the worst kind of luck. And the neighboring farms, with their beans and lettuces, could prove unmistakeably that no body lay in those fields: they were too assiduously cultivated, weeded, watered, and patrolled.

Then there was only one road, leading from the ranch, a county job, none too good. What I'll do, he told himself, is smash up the

car. Then the cops will know I couldn't have driven the body out. Okay; no transportation; no place within lugging distance except our own ranch. So if she's not there, then she's just run off, and I'm not involved. And when she doesn't show on August 20, the inheritance automatically becomes mine. Half a million bucks!

For a moment he searched his soul. Was it worth it? To risk the death cell for a mere five years? But those were vital years, his prime. I needn't go ahead unless the scheme is really foolproof, he reminded himself. That makes it a calculated gamble, with the odds much in his favor. If Aunt Norma weren't so stingy, he might manage to put up with things five more years, and enjoy life reasonably well, but she was quite hopeless: too tight, too moral, too narrow-minded. No "loose" women allowed; no fast cars; no fun, period. To hell with that, and her.

He was in his studio behind the house, chipping moodily at a large block of marble, a bit of sculpture begun two years before, and not far advanced, when a familiar green panel truck came jouncing down the private road.

When it stopped, the driver, a uniformed man, emerged briskly, notebook in hand. He was the meter inspector from Pacific Coast Edison, about to make his monthly check of kilowatts used; but the sight of him started a train of thought very helpful to Talbot, and one that doomed his aunt to an invisible grave . . .

Julian Morse Trowbridge looked very much like a 4-F gnome, being dwarfish, flabby, pallid, and ugly. But his large blue eyes gave with their electric glow some hint of the extraordinary brain behind them; and his general appearance of debility was in itself deceptive, since his diet would have ulcerated a Sicilian goat.

A Harvard PhD in Mathematical Physics at sixteen, Trowbridge possessed a powerful and cool intelligence that was poorly served by his hormones, so hot, fizzy, irrational, and unwilling to submit to any control from his higher centers.

The inevitable result of this tragic imbalance had been a complete collapse at eighteen. The young genius then vanished from the academic world, to reappear —but very unobtrusively—years later as a recluse who lived alone, on a small annuity from his grandparents, in a huge, rambling house in a poor nieghborhood of a big city a thousand miles away. There he accumulated vast piles of books, each more abstruse than the last, and acted as a kind of Solomon-in-Residence to people in the area.

There was little about mathematics, science, philosophy, economics, art, music, history, or lit-

erature that he didn't know, and he had that rarest of all capacities —the power quickly to integrate facts and theories from several of these fields as needed.

Captain Gregg, who was a competent detective, having gone to Trowbridge once—purely out of desperation, and on the advice of a retired cop who knew the man —now consulted with him whenever a particularly baffling case arose. He felt all the more inclined to do so because of the pleasure such problems gave the gnome. Mathematics was great fun, the genius implied, but a crime-puzzle has more human interest.

When he visited Trowbridge on this occasion, Gregg found the ex-prodigy explaining with great patience to a voluble little white-haired man just why his invention to save infants from being dropped on their heads by careless relations couldn't possibly work.

"No, no, Mr. Bellini," the gnome said, nodding a greeting to the detetive. "You miss the point. Lead-soled shoes will not turn the baby in mid-air, making it land head-up. Go home, sir, and stick a pencil into a small apple. You will find, I assure you, that however you hold it, apple up or apple down, it will fall in just that way, with no twisting to lower the center of mass."

And when the inventor, ungraciously, and full of doubts, had gone, Trowbridge sighed, shook his huge head on its thready neck, and said: "Galileo knocked the props from under that idea about four hundred years ago, and yet —" He gave Gregg a rather impish smile, blue eyes sparkling. "I take it you're not here about an

invention that invalidates physical laws."

"Right—and wrong! Not my invention, but Howard Talbot's, seems to break some kind of scientific law. You remember the invisible tomb case you solved? Well, this is a reprise, believe it or not."

The gnome brightened, leaning his elbows on the enormous desk. "Another missing body? How intriguing. Tell me about it."

"Mrs. Vining disappeared three days ago, and there's only one suspect worthy of the name: her nephew, Howard Talbot. He'll be thirty in August, and inherits about half a million dollars. But only if his aunt doesn't declare officially and legally that she's retaining guardianship another five years, as she has a right to do un-

der the terms of the will—made by Talbot's mother, much to his annoyance. It seems that Mrs. Vining hasn't approved Howard's behavior, and meant to keep control of him."

"How does the nephew explain her disappearance?"

"Fairly well; might fool a jury. He claims she felt her life work was now over, since he was ready to inherit and live his own life with no help from her. She seemed depressed, anxious, empty, at loose-ends—or so he says—with no reason to live. So she went forty miles to the coast and jumped into the sea. Only there's no trace of such a trip. He tells us some of her clothes are gone, but who can be sure? We don't know her wardrobe."

"And in this case, it won't hurt him, assuming he's guilty, that the body may never be found," Trowbridge said. "His inheritance, I infer, is not based on presumption of death. If she's not around to renew her control, he's on his own."

"Right."

"So you think he killed her and then disposed of the body."

"I'd bet my life on it."

"But what's the problem? Surely you can find what's left of the woman."

"That's just what I thought!" was the bitter retort. "He's pulled a miracle on us. Consider the situation. Before she disappeared, he smashed up their one car—banged into a tree. Accidentally, of course. Claims he lost control on a slick road after an early rain; very plausible. Car won't go; that's a fact. All right. They have fifty acres, with farms on the boundaries.

"She can't have left by car; she's not buried in somebody's bean field; so she's still on the Vining place. I won't go into all the details, but that's the way it is. Either she's stashed away on that ranch, with its few acres, or the boy's not lying, and his aunt did go under her own power. No trace—none."

"Plenty of room for a hidden grave on fifty acres," the gnome said.

"Sure. We've checked every square foot, believe me. There are ways of spotting such things. It's mostly dry, crumbly soil, with rock a few inches down. Even where you can go deeper, nobody could make a big hole without leaving obvious signs."

"Try bloodhounds?"

"Yes, but it was a waste of time. Her tracks are all over the ranch. At sixty-three she had more energy than a hungry tiger."

"Hmm," Trowbridge said, cocking his huge head. "What's her nephew like? How much imagination?"

"He's a wastrel and woman chaser. Had some training as an artist, stock salesman. Tried writ-

ing, too; that takes imagination, I'm told, even if he didn't get anywhere. School record unimpressive; but he had a flair for rather nasty pranks. So I'd guess," Gregg concluded sourly, "he might think of an unusual place to hide a body."

The gnome was silent for several moments. Then he said: "I can't suggest much off-hand, except that you get some low-level air photos of the area. Use both regular and heat-sensitive film. You may have missed the grave —camouflage—and find it on the prints. The peculiar perspective of aerial photos, plus the heat differentials exploited by infra-red, make camouflage less effective. Send me prints, of course."

"Will do," the detective assured him. "But I doubt that photos alone will break this one." Captain Gregg left.

SEATED at the messy desk, Trowbridge was studying the glossy eight-by-tens sent him by Gregg. They were, he thought, the only hope. He had gone over endlesly, in his mind, all the hiding places that were feasible on such a ranch, and had come up with nothing the detective had missed. They had consulted into the small hours, and whenever Trowbridge had said: "What about—" Gregg had promptly replied: "We checked that."

A body is not like a gem or a book; it's roughly a hundred pounds of organic material stubbornly resistant to complete dissolution, whether by fire, water, chemicals, or even time.

"You're sure she wasn't chopped up?" the gnome had asked irritably at one point. "Small pieces are much easier to get rid of."

"Our lab boys say no," the detective had assured him. "It makes quite a mess to do that to a body, especially in terms of microscopic traces: blood, hair, fluids. That's out."

Now Trowbridge went over the photos again, alone. There were the knolls, the ravines, the scattered boulders, the clusters of buildings and barns, the bordering trees—their branches had been inspected with binoculars; their trunks checked for concealed hollows—the scrubby brush, the ranked power-poles—and no sign of a murdered woman's body.

It was purely by chance that he swept the powerful magnifying glass high along one oblique shot. There shouldn't be any Mohamet's Coffin between earth and sky on a prosaic little ranch, but the gnome spotted something that made him steady the lens. He looked hard; his eyebrows rose and he took a sharp breath.

"Joe is dead and Sal's a widder!" he exclaimed softly. "Can such things be? That Talbot's a

blooming genius, unless I'm hallucinating."

He held the glass fixed again. The row of holes was plain, and not made by a drill, either. He knew the artisan, a scourge of the electric company: a colorful, attractive, charming rowdy of a bird: the California Woodpecker, in short. Shaking his head, Trowbridge reached for the phone, beginning a silvery chuckle as he visualized Gregg's reaction . . .

Some hours later the two men stood on Vining land, peering up at the top of a Pacific Coast Edison pole.

"See those holes," the gnome asked, handing his binoculars to the detective. "They were the giveaway. A woodpecker can't bore through steel, and even if he could, he wouldn't. No insects, and too much work to hide an acorn."

"It must be bigger than it looks from here," Gregg said. "And it looks real, just like old metal, and weather-stained. Are you sure—"

"They come in many shapes and sizes. Every city has them. People just don't see them, though. Even the cylindrical ones could easily hold a small body, if they had no mechanism inside, and were hollow fakes like this. These bigger, box-shaped ones on platforms are more of a rural specialty, I think. Some are transformers, but they may have other installations, too. You see all kinds on electric poles anywhere in the cities and towns. Talbot, after all, is a competent if uninspired artist. I phoned Edison, and found they had removed their transformer months ago; put up a more modern type farther down the line. But they left the wooden platform—wasn't worth dismantling it.

"Talbot obviously noted the thing, and thought of putting a fake box up there, painted to look like old metal. Dusk, or even moonlight, would have been the best time. When you gave up the hunt on the ranch, he could then bring her down for safe, permanent burial in some ravine. The meter was just read, so he'd have a month before any Edison man came around again.

"Not that he'd necessarily spot a transformer that shouldn't be up there. All those installations must be about as invisible even to company men after a while as to people on city streets. Think of a cylinder the size of a hot-water heater up on at least one pole per block in every town and city that doesn't have underground utilities, and yet if you ask the average person, he wouldn't remember noting a single one."

"I'm probably an idiot to question your theory," Gregg said uneasily, "but no one man could haul a big wooden box—it must

be about four feet on an edge—up to that platform. And if Talbot had an accomplice—"

"No," the gnome said. "In his place, I'd fix the thing on the ground, making it of six fairly lightweight panels that can quickly be assembled. Judging from the woodpecker's attacking it so soon, he must have used old, weathered boards with plenty of beetle larvae in them. Plywood or green lumber wouldn't appeal to the bird. Anyhow, with that long extension ladder we saw in the barn, he could take the panels up one at a time, and assemble the fake up there. The woman would be more of a load, but to carry a hundred pounds up a ladder isn't too hard for a young, desperate man."

WHEN THEY brought Norma Vining down, it was found she'd been strangled, and her body carefully wrapped in several layers of thin but tough plastic film.

"Almost as good as a casket," the detective said.

Trowbridge's face, normally greyish, was now green. He rarely left home, but had on this occasion obeyed a vagrant impulse to see his logic match the facts on the scene of the murder. Right now he regretted the impulse, and thought longingly of the musty house, even though he had an unhappy conviction that Bellini would be waiting with another solution to the infant problem—perhaps a tiny parachute.

"A lot of work for nothing," the gnome said weakly, determined to prove his composure. "He still didn't get away with it."

"Thanks to you," Captain Gregg said. "And as for work, the pay was to have been half a million. And, besides," the detective added sardonically, "it's about the only hard job he ever tackled!"

Mike Shayne Leads Next Issue's Headliners with—

THIEF IN THE FAMILY

It's one of the very best of all Mike Shayne stories—the kind of superb yarn only Brett Halliday can write!

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Featuring

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When a double agent is false to both masters, there is no room for mercy. Money—desire—beauty, all are gone. Only Death still remains.

THERE'S MUSIC in women, you know. Especially in Panhandle blondes. Panhandle blondes make a guy feel like he's the world's greatest shower stall virtuoso. Among other things, the guy wants to sing. The only trouble is, there's always some nemesis lurking in a shadowed corner like a vulture-type husband about to sweep down on a wayward wife.

My nemesis was not a husband, thank God. The blonde did not have a husband. My nemesis was Honeybelle, who is neither blonde nor woman but who also makes me sing—for my supper, as they say.

This morning I did not sing. I cursed.

"What was that?" asked the blonde, stirring sleepily.

We were sort of sitting on a couch in the darkened front room of my duplex unit. No lamp was lit, not even the smoking lamp. The only light was a feeble glow that filtered through an open door from the next room.

Now, from the couch and the blonde, I could see into that room and what I saw filled me with misgivings. Honeybelle's head was turned.

Honeybelle is a tiny black statuette of a naked and busty African female who occupies a queenly position on the shelf over the desk and typewriter.

Normally, Honeybelle stands regally with her head turned in a half profile to her right. Now her head was turned in a half profile to her left.

The turning had been triggered by the invisible telephonic light in the wall behind her. The light is operated only from an inconspicuous office which is the hub of Washington's most secreted bureau, and Honeybelle's position meant there was a message.

Well, I had a message for Washington, too. Summoning a man when he is entertaining a blonde on a mild spring morning is a crock. But, unfortunately, I am not in a position with the Bureau to send messages or express an opinion; I merely receive—and heed.

So I said to the blonde, "Doll, you're never going to believe this."

"Try me, Mr. Kevin Kar," she purred. "There are already many things about this night I'll never believe no matter how long I live."

"I need my arm."

"Huh?"

"It's under your head. Asleep. I have to get up."

"Sugar-babe, you-all gotta be kiddin'!"

The blonde lifted her gloriously sunbrowned shoulders and I managed to withdraw my arm. I also managed to fall from the couch. I grunted. The blonde cocked on an elbow and stared down on me as if to say, "I hope you're dead!" so I assured her: "Nothing damaged, love."

She looked disappointed, then pouted, "Where are you going?"

Some things are for blondes to know, some things are not. This was one of the nots. I crossed the darkened front room and entered the bedroom.

"Kevin . . ."

I closed the door on her plea. I could not hear her now; she could not hear me. The bedroom is soundproofed.

I snapped on a lamp and stared for a moment into the mirror of the dresser. The reflection of a tall man, erect in carriage, wide in shoulders, with dominent Kiowa coloring and features, stared back at me. The man stood six-three, weighed in at two hundred and seventeen pounds, had health, no wealth, a square jaw, a black crewcut, and was a celibate. He also was supposed to be a writer. He wasn't. Writing was a cover.

I unscrewed the left knob from the middle drawer of the dresser. The curt taped message from Washington came from the mirror: "One sixty-seven." Pause. "Twen-

ty-Eight." Pause. "Base jet. Nine. *Holly.*"

I had been given a code number instead of a code name: one sixty-seven. It meant I was to use my true name, Kevin Kar. Twenty-Eight was a west coast metropolitan area and I was to travel by Air Force jet. Departure time was nine o'clock in the morning. And Holly, by closing the message with his name, had demanded confirmation.

He got it—and the Panhandle blonde got the old heave-ho.

She was not happy. She cursed when I put her outside my front door. I was not happy, either. But in my business you do not quibble with Washington. Washington outranks women. Even blondes.

In my kitchen, I touched the special spot on the side of the refrigerator. While I waited for the refrigerator to lift a few inches from the floor and turn in the slow half circle, I wondered what was ahead. I would not be told until I had reached Twenty-Eight.

I opened the door on the back of the refrigerator to the cache of weapons. They were what had kept me alive the past eight years. I removed the tear gas ring and the conventional gun, the cigarette package transmitter and receiver, the lapel Kiwanis button with its content of lethal poison and finally the special gun which would roast almost anything in a mushroom of fire.

I now was prepared for Twenty-Eight.

MY PILOT was a silent, weathered Air Force veteran who lifted the jet from Amarillo Air Force Base expertly and put it down on a west coast field before I was able to settle into deep sleep. He disappeared into the brilliant sun again and I disappeared inside a cab, gave the driver a downtown address, made sure we were not being tailed, then gave the driver Stella Boyt's address.

Stell's house looks like a Moorish castle and is not quite as large as the Pentagon. It's out where there is space and high taxes and people who can afford the taxes. There is a huge swimming pool—half inside and half outside the castle—a green, geometrically sculptured yard, shrubs, flowers, hedges, and you can see the people who live on her street on your movie and television screens any day or night.

A beautiful, smooth-limbed maid opened the front door of the castle soon after I had dismissed my cab.

Forget the screens, friends. Here was the live action. A fresh, unpainted Mongol face, impudent thrust of breasts, pinched in waist and black eyes that contained a hint of feverish excitement had me grinning boyishly.

"Yes?" she said.

"Kar?" I said hopefully. "Kevin

Kar? Perhaps you were expecting me?"

"Not I."

"Shucks."

"Shucks?" A natural eyebrow arched.

"It's an expression, honey. Forget it. Take me to my leader."

I started inside. She lifted a hand, put spread, steepled fingers against my chest, stopped me. "Now just a moment—"

"Stella, doll," I said patiently. "This suitcase is getting heavy."

The amusement was there, all right, right there in those beautiful black eyes.

"Okay," I said. I had a few seconds in which to play. "You."

"Me?"

"A maid."

"Hmm. I see. Well, perhaps, Mr. Kar, everything is not as it appears on the surface."

"I'd be truly disappointed," I admitted, favoring the impudent chest.

"I mean," she said, "you didn't have to tell me your name. I knew."

"Ahhh. And have you got a name?"

"Pegeen."

"Pegeen. Hmm. So Americanish."

"My father was Americanish."

"Yep. Okay. That fits. So now we're getting someplace, Pegeen. We—"

"We are?"

"You knew me without a handle."

"Well, yes . . ."

"You wouldn't have known me if you are just the maid."

"Oh."

Then she laughed gently and stepped back. "All right, Mr. Kar. Miss Boyt is waiting for you at the pool."

"One other thing, Pegeen."

"Yes?"

"Holly. Our chief. All of a sudden I realize his taste is not all in his mouth."

She grinned and then went ahead of me through the dimness of the house.

Following her was even more challenging. The high-thrusting movement of hips stirred cherished memories of yesterday.

But suddenly we were outside in the brilliance again and Pegeen had stopped.

"Miss Boyt," she said significantly, "is across the pool. Waiting."

She was over there, okay. Across the blue-watered, spade-shaped end of the pool. Stretched out and propped on a cushioned lounge. A cigarette in the fingers of one hand, a glass in the fingers of the other hand, black sunglasses on her nose, two brilliant strips of red bikini cloth encircling her browned body.

But Pegeen was much closer, so I leered at her.

She wasn't shocked. The black eyes glinted wickedly. Then she patted me lightly on the chest and

said, "Well, thank you, Mr. Kar, but you're going away. I admit, though, it might be interesting."

"Dangerous?"

"Like, well—"

Then Pegeen lifted her skirt and pinched a garter snap. A jet of tear gas shot off into space.

"See what could happen if we got together, Mr. Kar?" she purred.

"Kevin-baby!" Stella Boyt called him from across the pool.

"Just a moment, doll," I yelled back.

"You've had your moment! Get over here!"

I'd had my moment, okay, but it wasn't because I got my tail over there. It was because Pegeen dropped her skirt and turned back into the house. I stood staring after her for several seconds before I went around the stem end of the swimming pool, using the walk at the glass wall.

I almost didn't make it, even then. A long, bronzed streak of movement shot out from under my feet while I was on the walkover and I jerked against the wall. Then I heard Stella laugh and I knew the guy who was now stroking magnificantly under the blue water had come from the half of the pool inside the castle. The guy popped up through the calm surface, turned, grinned on me, waved. His name was Benjamin Sand.

"Kevin," Stell chortled when I finally got to her, "it's good to see you again."

She is fifty. Maybe sixty. But combined efforts of beauty salon experts, couturiers, money, inborn youthful exuberance and a natural stubbornness, keep her looking forty. This day she didn't look an hour older as she shifted her well perserved body against the lounge and waved the cigarette at a webbed chair near her red polished toenails. There was a quick smile on her painted mouth.

"Sit," she said.

I put down my suitcase, sat, wiped my brow.

"It's warm today. Maybe you should cool off first."

"Do I have a week?"

"You have about four hours. Join Benjamin. Do you want a swim suit?"

"I think I'd rather have Peggeen."

"Didn't you just ask her?"

"Yeah, but—"

"And you got your answer."

"Where did she breeze in from, doll?"

"Far, far away. Yesterday. She's why you are here."

I must have looked as if I found new hope, because Stell added quickly, "Forget it, lover. Are you sure you don't want to take a swim? Look at Benjamin. He's like an eel, isn't he? So smooth, so nice and lean—"

Benjamin Sand was gracefully lapping the pool. Back and forth. His muscles seemed to be working tirelessly. And Stell took off the

black sunglasses to smile fondly on him.

"Beautiful," she breathed. Then she recovered from that instant of faltering. She remembered who she was and that a woman who is playing a vital double role in life does not allow the pleasure of one to sweep aside the control of the other. She remembered why I was there and who had sent me.

She put the sunglasses back on her nose, settled lower on the lounge and said, "There's a flight out this afternoon. You and Benjamin will be on it."

The flight was to Twenty-Nine, a city up the coast.

"Benjamin is making a delivery," she said. "Tomorrow morning he will be involved in an automobile accident and there will be surgery at a hospital."

"That vital, huh?"

"Extremely, Kevin-baby. Certain friends of ours in Southeast Asia need something quite badly. Benjamin is taking this something to one of their people who already has arrived in the country. She came in yesterday. Pegeen trailed her, made sure she was settled. Her name is Piu Ling. She is now waiting for Benjamin in Twenty-Nine."

"Me?"

"You are a tail. Nothing is to happen to Benjamin before the auto accident. The worst thing that could happen is that he'd disappear. We can't afford that. Not if Benjamin is still alive when and if he should be wisked off—"

"Hold it!"

But Stell went on without looking up at me. "Killer you," she said softly, "if necessary."

"Benjie?"

"Benjamin."

"But he's one of our best!"

"Which is exactly why he is making the delivery, Kevin-baby. That and his unique skull structure."

"I don't suppose," I said acidly, "I'm to be told what has made Benjie a sudden target."

"You are not."

"Or who the target shooters might be."

"We're not sure there is anyone. We are merely taking precautions. Someone might try for Benjamin. Someone might not. We hope not, naturally. But if there is someone, they will not be target shooters. They will want Benjamin alive. They will probably attempt to kidnap him.

"That's where you come in. You are to prevent the kidnaping, the same as Pegeen is to prevent the kidnaping of Piu Ling following Benjamin's surgery."

"Hey!"

It was Benjie from the water. He heaved himself up out of the pool smoothly and came to us. He was grinning as if he'd just been told he and Pegeen were going on a sixty-day junket as man and wife. He said, "My ears are burning."

"They should be, pal," I muttered.

He laughed. Perfect white teeth flashed against the background of tanned face. "Cheer up, Indian. Things could be worse for you, you know. The situation could be reversed. I could be tailing you."

Yeah, I thought. Also with orders to kill. It was one of the hazards of the game.

"But not this trip," he grinned. "I'm the guy with the right kind of head for this trip." He used a forefinger to tap the top of his skull. "You know?"

I knew.

THE DRONE of the airliner was designed for sleep, but to sleep was to make Benjamin Sand even more vunerable than he already was. He sat in the aisle seat across and six rows ahead of me, rigged as a folk singer.

The wig on his head was long haired and golden. He'd managed somehow to make his complexion pasty. He wore a baggy, unpressed suit, and there was a guitar under his wing. Beside him, a dapper grandfather in expensive attire was ignoring him as if he'd forgot his deodorant.

I sat and stared on the long hair against the back of Benjie's neck. Everything seemed normal enough. The other passengers seemed interested only in their own peculiar pleasures.

I hadn't found a suspicious character in the bunch, unless you included the little old lady sitting in the seat beside me. She was suspicious, all right. Of me. She thought I was a criminal. I'd told her I was a boxer. I even kept working the squeeze ball in my hand to lend credence, but I could see she thought I was a criminal.

It was written in the brilliance of her eyes as she chattered at me. She liked criminals, and she liked boxers. She thought there was something synonymous about them.

And perhaps the equanimity aboard the plane should have been consolation for me. But it wasn't. There is something hypocritical about serenity. It makes me think of a time bomb ticking away toward explosion. So the lone consolation for me was in our destination. Twenty-Nine. Aloysius Such-

ow lived in Twenty-Nine. Perhaps, after tomorrow, I might have time to visit with Aloysius. It had been a long time since our last visit.

The plane put down without incident. I rented a car at the terminal, then drove to the assigned motel I checked into the assigned room, which was straight across a tiny courtyard from Benjie's unit.

He was already inside. He stood briefly in his window as I vacated the rental car; then he pulled the drapes and I entered my unit. I had a clear view of the wall and door that hid Benjie. No one was going to get to that door without me seeing them.

I took up the vigil.

Vigils are a bore. Vigils mean you keep your eyes peeled even if there isn't anything interesting to see. Of course, darkness adds handicap to vigils. After darkness, the valued man being watched is largely on his own. And, on that particular evening, I couldn't think of a better man to be on his own.

Benjie was experienced in this game. Benjie knew how to remain out of pocket, even down to the point where you don't go out for a meal and you don't have a meal brought, in. You pack a lunch in a suitcase or you go hungry.

Me? I hadn't packed a lunch, and I was hungry. But I waited. I kept on watching. I sat in the dark of my unit and I took in everything that moved near Benjie's wall. The hour hand on my wrist watch moved around to nearly ten-thirty.

Come on, Benjie! Go to bed! I'm hungry!

He finally snapped out the light. I grumbled as I lifted myself out of the chair and stretched. I looked across the courtyard. I couldn't see Benjie standing at his black window now, of course, but I knew. He was there, and he was laughing at how hungry I was.

I left the unit. I felt like lifting the squeeze ball in my hand at him in a threatening gesture but I resisted. I walked down to the motel coffee shop, went inside. Benjie was to be on his own for thirty minutes.

It wasn't a difficult assignment, but there was a tiny, nicking sense of urgency inside me as I ordered the food. In spite of my confidence in Benjie, I didn't like the idea of being where I couldn't see him. I should have, I decided too late, had the food brought to me.

I ate quickly—too fast—and returned to my unit. I stood outside the door and lit a cigarette.

It was the signal. Benjie could go to bed now. I was like MacArthur. I had returned. I would watch for three hours, then Benjie's alarm would awaken him and he would remain awake in darkness for three hours while I slept. That would make it five o'clock in the morning. It would be daylight. Benjie would sleep while I watched again. At eight he was to leave the unit in an assigned cab, go down-

town, rent a car, and go out and have a wreck.

It was all cut and dried, except that I went inside my unit, belched away the quickness of eating, took a few seconds to use the bath—and then stiffened against the banging on my door.

Benjie?

Unlikely, but possible. Something could have happened.

The knock sounded again. Readying the squeeze ball, I cracked the door, put an eye against it. Something hard and round and with a hole in it banged against my eyeball and sent me reeling back inside the unit.

The back of my knees struck the edge of the bed and I went down. Then there suddenly was light and I was sprawled and there was an unappetizing man standing over me and something hard jammed against my heart.

I didn't have to look down, but I did. The gun in the man's fist was huge. More intriguing, it wore a silencer, one of these new silencers recently developed in Europe. This silencer made absolutely no noise. It was, as they say, a true silencer.

"Up!" the man commanded. He backed off, went to the window, snapped shut the drape.

I took heart. I was to live, at least for a few more minutes.

But I also knew a terrible premonition. Was Benjamin Sand dead? I had a hunch he was. I also had a hunch he was why I was to live for those few minutes. The man had not found what he wanted after Benjie had died.

He was a small, unclean man in a hirsute haircut and chin beard who looked wired together, one of these dudes who looked as if, among other things, he would sell a dying dog to a kid. Behind black-rimmed glasses that bridged a skinny nose were dark eyes that were popped out of his skull. He smelled and looked high on pot.

"Okay, Washington," he snarled, moving in on me again. "Give! Where's the film?"

He had not found what he wanted.

He was close enough. I lashed up with my foot, kicked the gun hand aside, brought up the squeeze ball and shot acid into his face. He howled, but it was already too late. I had his gun wrist in my right hand and the gun pointed up when I shot my right fist into his middle. He whooshed air and doubled.

I brought my knee up against his face and chopped down with interlocked fingers against his spine. His body went down; his head snapped back. I heard the crunch of splintering vertebrae, and somebody had lost another gun.

I stripped out of my trousers quickly. The acid from the goon's face had already eaten into the cloth. I put on fresh pants from the suitcase and raced across the courtyard to Benjie's unit. The door was closed, but unlocked. I shot inside,

fell over him. Stell's supposition about kidnaping had been a crock.

When I snapped on the lamp, I knew what had happened. The guy had come to the door. Benjie had opened. The guy had shot Benjie through the throat and then entered. He had torn the place apart, did not find what he wanted, knew frustration, and came to me.

I telephoned Aloysius Suchow and told him what I needed.

"I have a single," he said. He didn't sound surprised to know I was in town.

"I need two," I said flatly. "You can include Benjie."

"Damn it! How—"

I put the phone together and carried Benjie across the courtyard to put him in the trunk of the rental car. Then I went into my unit, picked up the dead man's gun, and knew an urge to kick his head from his fractured neck.

Instead, I fastened a hand on his coat and yanked him outside and rolled him into the trunk too, careful to keep my hands away from the acid that was now eating into his face.

I drove across the wet, foggy city to Aloysius.

Aloysius is a friend of long standing. Aloysius was my father's friend in the old days in the OSS in the South Pacific.

My father is buried out there on a remote island. Aloysius left his right arm on the same island. But Aloysius is a big man, a tough man. Today he is a successful business man, a big, tough, successful guy. He conducts many funerals. He is also an extremely banal man. His name does not bother him. His occupation does not bother him. Wet, foggy, hot midnights do not bother him. Nor does my presence on his doorstep with two dead guys in my car trunk.

The only thing that bothers him is one of the guys is Benjie. Aloysius had liked Benjie.

He used his only arm and flopped Benjie over his shoulder, I carried the gunner inside the mortuary and back among the coffins. Aloysius said, "Service this morning, ten o'clock. Lawn Hill Cemetery."

"I won't be there."

"Understandable."

He opened a casket lid and I dropped the gunner and his gun inside. Aloysius stretched out Benjie on top of the gunner and closed the lid.

"Take care, Aloysius."

"Lawn Hill is safer than a bank vault, Indian."

"Yeah."

I went out the service door, drove back to the motel, entered my unit, stood dead still in the darkness and took a second whiff of the air. It had an apple scent now. I got out my gun. I had or had had company.

I quit breathing, squatted, the gun poised. Nothing moved. I listened hard. No sound. Slowly, I

lifted my arm and my fingers found the switch of a lamp. I hesitated, then popped on the lamplight. The room looked untouched. No bullets snapped at me. No huge monster appeared in the bath doorway.

There was only the high-heeled pumps under my bed.

I went down on my hands and knees.

And there they were. The legs. Beautiful, sleek, nyloned legs. They were spread about a foot on the carpeting and they were hooked to a high, healthy fanny.

Somehow I knew it was an Oriental fanny.

The girl yelped when I caught a trim ankle. A spiked heel lashed out at me. I caught the other ankle and yanked her out from under the bed. A pink dress skidded. There was more pink. I grunted.

She kicked, spluttered, beat carpeting with fists. I let her kick and enjoyed myself. Then suddenly she became immobile for a couple of seconds before she flipped onto her back. I straddled her, sat down hard on her stomach and stuck the muzzle of my gun against a huge black eye.

"Hi," I said amiably.

She didn't wiggle.

She was a doll. Chinese—maybe Korean. Anyway, she was Oriental and the kind of girl I like to watch turn handsprings in a full skirt on a spring day. Mid-twenties, I guessed, with a chest that was very large and real. "My name, honey, is Kevin Kar," I said finally, keeping things congenial for the moment. "You?"

"Piu Ling!" she snapped. "And please take that gun out of my eye and get off of me, Mr. Kevin Kar!"

I took the gun out of her eye, but I didn't leave her. I merely slid down to straddle her thighs. It kept her pinned.

She said coldly, "Off!" And then she sat up.

I remained. It put us almost nose to nose. I grinned. She smelled like apples. I stuck the gun muzzle against her heart and reached around her head and removed the long stickpin from her bow. The bow fell to the carpeting. I squeezed the head of the stickpin. A fluid dripped from the needle end.

"Interesting," I said.

"And lethal! All right, so you play safe!"

"And just what are you playing, Miss Piu Ling? Just what the hell are you playing in my room? Hide and seek?"

She claimed to have been at the motel since the previous afternoon. She claimed to have been put there by Pegeen. She claimed to have watched Benjie and I check in. She claimed to have seen all of the happenings of the night.

Then she said, "When you drove away with the bodies, I thought you might be leaving the city, I thought—well, I didn't know what was happening. So I

went to Sand's room, saw the mess, then came over here. I thought—"

She suddenly let the words dribble off and she dropped her eyes. She fiddled briefly with a large button on the front of the pink dress. The tension went out of her. And then she looked up and the black eyes were pleading now. "Look, Mr. Kar. I had some wild idea about finding the formula. I was searching your place when you returned. I didn't think you'd take time to ask questions if you found me here so I hid under the bed."

"You're heavy," she said.

I risked a glance down and it was all she needed. She came forward, one hand slashing against my throat and the other flipping the gun out of my grip. A fist crashed against my nose, driving me back from her.

She was on her feet swiftly. I gagged for air and scissored my legs viciously, caught her ankles in the cross motion and cut her feet out from under her. She went down hard with a yelp. Her fingers clawed my body, her knees churned and it quickly became evident that if I was to survive I must bite.

I found an exposed earlobe and chomped down hard. She squealed and arched.

"You," she choked, hanging on to her injured ear, "play dirty!"

"Well, this is the Death game, isn't it?" I rattled. "I mean—literally?"

It was the Death game, okay. She managed to turn into me then. My forehead was about three inches from one of the large buttons that held her pink dress together and her fingers were suddenly squeezing that button—and I realized, too late.

I felt the tiny prick against my forehead, and then I was out of it.

THE FIRST thing I saw when I came awake were the sleek, nyloned legs. The calves and knees were tight together and the edge of the pink skirt was tucked in under the knees. Looking down at me from the knees was the muzzle of my gun and above the gun was the blank Oriental face with the unblinking eyes.

"Convinced?" asked the girl from her seat on the edge of the bed.

"I think I should be dead."

I lifted my head. She let me get about halfway up—far enough to notice that the safety of my gun was still on—then she put a spiked-heel against my chest, stopping me.

"You still could die," she said flatly. "There's a dagger imbedded in the heel."

"I'm impressed."

"All I ask is that you believe I'm on your side," she said. "And take that silly-looking dart out of your forehead."

I felt gingerly. She didn't remove her heel. I found the tiny

dart, pulled it from my skin, stared at it, flipped it away.

"Now do we talk?" she said.

"About what?"

"The formula, naturally."

"What formula?"

It didn't faze her. "Do you have it or did they get it from Sand?"

"Honey, I don't know anything about any damned formula."

Her heel dug a little deeper into my chest. She seemed to debate. To kill or not to kill? Then she said, "All right, Mr. Kar, I'll play it your way for the moment.

"There's a new bullet. Jet-propelled. When the bullet leaves a gun it will move to its target on its own power. The propellant, similar to gun cotton, is contained in the base of the bullet itself. This now is possible because of the unusual nature of the propellant. It is more powerful than smokeless powder, it is just as safe and stable, and it can be varied chemically to produce varying velocities. The formula"—she paused dramatically—"is for the propellant. Now, are you satisfied?"

"No," I said.

"What?" She frowned.

"This jazz about a jet bullet is news to me, doll."

The frown deepened. The heel dug in. "Mr. Kar—I'm beginning to wonder if you really are Mr. Kar."

Before she could wonder enough to snap the safety off my gun, I reached up and pinched the back of her knee. She screeched. Her foot lifted. I caught her ankle in one hand and the gun in the other. I twisted the gun out of her grip and lifted her leg high. Then I flipped her and she went over her head and off the bed to land flat on her face on the carpeting.

I flopped on the bed, put the muzzle of the gun against the base of her neck and held it there while she beat the carpeting with her balled hands and her toes.

"Who killed Benjie?" I snarled.

She stiffened, didn't say a word. I put pressure on her neck with the gun.

"E-Eiger."

It came up to me muffled. I scowled. I'd never heard of Eiger.

"A friend of yours?"

"No. He's—he's Peking. That man—that man you killed has to be one of Eiger's men . . ."

She let it trail off.

"You?"

"Piu Ling. Please? You must believe me."

There was one way to be sure.

I left the bed, yanked her to her feet. She was a mess now, and her confidence seemed to have slipped. Her eyes suddenly were dancing, wouldn't meet mine. She fiddled with her dress, smoothed it.

I propelled her toward the door. She stopped, stared at me wide-eyed. "Where we going?"

"Trip, cat. Downstate. You're going to drive. I want someone to get a look at you."

"But—"

"Too many people seem to know too much about this action."

"Neither of our organizations are infallible, Mr. Kar. There . . . there has to be a leak somewhere. That's how Eiger found out—"

I took her arm and marched her out of the unit—and straight into the arms of two men. One took her and the other took me. I saw two long faces and then I wasn't seeing anything.

The next time I came awake I thought I was in a vast, plush tomb. There was light. I could see everything in the tomb from here I lay sprawled in the middle of a huge, double bed. The entire ceiling was a mirror and it reflected lushness: the bed and me, thick carpeting on the floor, heavy, comfortable furniture, a stereo, television, radio, bar—

Bar!

I merked up into a sitting position and stared. I had been stripped. I wore shorts. No more. But across from me, sitting near the bar, a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, was Piu Ling. She was shoeless now, but she still wore nylons and the pink dress. I noticed how the dress was fastened. I left the bed, padded over to her, inventoried. The large buttons were gone but it looked as if Piu Ling had stripped a half slip and used the strips to fasten the dress.

"After they found all of those weapons on you," she said in a meek voice, "they took everything we had. For a while"—color crept into her cheeks—"for a while I thought they were going to leave us together naked."

"Honey," I said, "just where the hell are we? I feel as if I've been asleep for days."

"You've been asleep many hours," she confirmed. "And I think we are in Hawaii. I think we are in Honolulu. Eiger has a place in Honolulu."

"Eiger! Honolulu!"

She nodded somberly, sipped from her glass. "We are in his custody, I'm sure."

"Then why aren't we dead?"

"Because he is after the formula. Because he doesn't know which one of us has it."

"Is that milk you're drinking?"

"Hardly. Bourbon. I hope to become quite intoxicated before Eiger decides to question me. I'm sure I'm not going to enjoy his method."

I turned, took in the room again. The walls were empty, no pictures, no light switches. I looked up at the mirrored ceiling. The illumination in the room seemed to come from hidden tubes where the mirror met the blank walls.

I walked around, examined the only two doors. One door opened into a luxurious bath; the other door didn't open.

I returned to Piu Ling. She had moved to the bed, sat there now,

knees crossed, staring down into the glass in her hand.

"Hey," I said. A gentleness had suddenly taken over inside me.

She looked up quickly. "I don't . . . like this," she admitted.

I sat beside her, attempted to make my grin reassuring. "Talk in my ear, doll," I whispered.

She frowned. I formed the silent words with my lips: "I've got a hunch the place is bugged. I think Eiger can hear every word we say."

She glanced around, nodded, drank from the glass. I wiggled a finger at her. She put her ear near my mouth.

"Have you seen anyone?" I asked. "Anyone been in here?"

I felt her nod. She whispered. "A Hawaiian man. He made—made me take off all my clothing."

I started to look at her but her fingers suddenly were against the back of my neck and she kept my mouth near her ear. "He took my buttons and my shoes."

"No one else?"

"No."

"Is that the only time he was here? When he made you—"

She nodded.

"Good," I said aloud. I kissed her lips.

For an instant, I thought she was going to claw me; then she was clinging to me, and I knew she was a damned frightened gal. She was trembling.

Frightened girls need comforting.

METAL AGAINST metal alerted me. I butted the cigarette and popped up on an elbow on the bed and watched the door open. A well-constructed young Hawaiian took a key from the door lock as he came into the room.

Piu Ling appeared in the bath doorway, but the Hawaiian ignored her.

He motioned me from the bed.

"You," he said. "Come."

I went because he was wearing a felt and holster and inside the holster was my special gun, the one that shoots fire.

I winked at Piu Ling. Then I was in a long, concrete corridor outside the room, padding along barefooted, while the Hawaiian clomped along behind me. He was smart.

He clomped far enough back to stay out of reach.

I went up concrete stairs at the end of the corridor and into another plush room. The brilliance

stopped me, made me squint. A hand against my spine sent me on into the room.

I stopped again, stared on the man who stood with his back to me, his hands clasped low on his spine. The man was looking out a giant picture window, and outside I recognized some familiar landmarks of Honolulu.

The man turned. He looked at ease. He was smiling. He was a medium-statured, expensively dressed guy in a white Palm Beach. His shoes held a high polish and a diamond glittered from a finger on each hand. He might have been any expensive European you know. He had that look about him.

"Eiger?" I said.

"Mr. Kar?" he returned.

He laughed gently and waved a hand around the room.

"Look around," he said. "There's a bar, cigarettes. Help yourself. I hate to see a man uncomfortable."

"Then how about my pants?"

He laughed again, moved behind a polished desk, sat. But he said nothing, so I looked around. The Hawaiian was gone. I was alone with Eiger in what seemed to be a ground floor den of a vast private home.

"You may open the drape, Mr. Kar," Eiger said when he saw my curiosity.

I pulled a cord and looked through a wall window and down on Piu Ling. I could see every inch of the tomb and most of Piu Ling. She was showering.

I burned, snapped the drapes closed. "A very fancy ceiling you have, Eiger," I growled.

"Yes." He nodded, looked pleased with himself. "Little escapes me in that room.

I didn't move. I knew I'd be dead if I wiggled a toe. So I stood there.

Eiger chuckled. Then abruptly his mouth turned down and his eyes became bright slits. "You know what I want, Mr. Kar."

"Go to hell, pal."

"I see." He pushed a button on the desk, sat, said nothing, then after a few seconds went to the drape and opened it again.

When I looked down into the tomb this time I saw the Hawaiian entering the room. Piu Ling had left the shower. She was toweling. The Hawaiian surprised her. She leaped back, attempted to cover herself with the towel. The Hawaiian was quick. The towel disappeared from her and he shoved her across the room to the bed.

Piu Ling put up a good fight but it was like a domestic cat matching wits with a jungle tiger.

"Now, Mr. Kar?" Eiger hissed.

"Nothing," I said, forcing the blandness.

"You have no feelings for the girl? I thought you did."

"It's her scrap."

Eiger snapped shut the drapes, hit the desk button again. Five

minutes later, the Hawaiian was with me. There were nail scratches across one cheek. If he gave me an inch he wouldn't even own the cheek. He didn't give me the inch.

Piu Ling was in the bath when I was put inside the tomb. The door was closed. I thought I heard sobs.

"Hey, doll," I said as gently as I knew how, "can I come in?"

"Y-yes."

She was on her knees and she was being sick in the bathtub. I was helpless. All I could do was wait. Finally she got to her feet, scrubbed her face and toweled. When she turned on me, there was a hollowness in her eyes.

"Do you see why I wanted to be intoxicated?" she mumbled.

I took her in my arms. "I know, doll. I saw."

She jerked. I continued to hold her as I told her. She trembled violently.

"We're in Honolulu, all right," I whispered finally, "and we may have a chance."

She looked as if she couldn't believe me.

"If we can get upstairs," I said in her ear, "we might make it. That Hawaiian bastard will be back sometime. If I can jump him—"

"But Eiger, I believe, will see from his den!"

"Let him see. If I can get the gun away from the Hawaiian—"

"Perhaps I can get it for you."

I stared on her. "Not that again, doll."

"My bra," she breathed, tiny fires beginning to flicker far back in her eyes. "Yes, Kevin, we have a chance!"

"Doll—"

"Let me do this my way," she whispered, turning out of my arms. "You be ready to jump him." And then she was in the bedroom and she said aloud, "Aren't they ever going to feed us? I'm hungry."

I knew Eiger was watching us, listening.

"Dinner will be served in five minutes."

The voice came out of nowhere. I stood and stared, looking for the speaker that had carried Eiger's voice to us.

Abruptly Piu Ling was in front of me. She was almost smiling.

"See?" she said. "It pays to advertise."

The Hawaiian pushed a cart of steaming food into the room. He motioned me back against a wall. Then he moved the cart toward the bed. He was wearing the belt and my holstered fire gun.

Piu Ling was beside him when he straightened from pushing the cart. I braced against the wall, ready for anything. Piu Ling said huskily, "Thank you, darling."

It surprised the Hawaiian. He gave her a startled look. She was smiling on him. She looped her arms around his neck. She locked him against her front and her mouth moved to his.

He stiffened with a grunt. Then

he was backing away from her, his face caught in an expression of disbelief. I could see why. Twin daggers protruded from Piu Ling's dress front: Twin streams of blood dribbled from the Hawaiian's chest. I vowed never to get too close to Piu Ling's bra.

I leaped, struck down the Hawaiian, snatched my gun from the holster, propelled Piu Ling toward the door and triggered a ball of fire at the mirrored ceiling. I wasn't going to kill anyone with that shot, but the glass blackened and no one could see down into the room, either.

Piu Ling was already halfway along the corridor when I left the room.

A guy I recognized appeared at the top of the cement steps. He was one of the two who had kidnaped us from the motel.

He died in a scream and a flash of fire.

Then we were upstairs and in Eiger's den.

No one was in sight, but I heard shouts coming from another corner of the house. I found a chair, pitched it through the picture window. Piu Ling went out headfirst, landed like an experienced gymnast, somersaulted and was on her feet and running. I went the same route.

We shot across grass down to the street, turned along a sidewalk. Out in the street, cars squealed tires, slowed.

I spotted a guy alone in a car. He was stopped. I yanked open his door, shoved the gun at him.

"Downtown!" I yelled. "Take us downtown!"

I pushed Piu Ling inside and we moved. I gave the frightened driver an address. When we were there, I told him to pull around the corner and stop. Then I had Piu Ling's hand and we sprinted into an alley. We ran halfway through the block before I turned into a door and burst into a large kitchen. Five cooks gaped on us.

"Get Fritz!" I shouted, and sagged against a long work counter.

Fritz had belonged to Holly in Washington for as long as anyone could remember. Fritz was a pro who operated one of the best medium-priced hotels in Honolulu. Fritz put us in a room high up in the hotel, found clothing that would fit me, made a couple of phone calls, then told us our cab was waiting.

"Kevin," Piu Ling breathed in awe after we were settled in the cab, "where are we going?"

"Back to the mainland, honey," I said grimly. "And this may be the fastest trip you'll ever make."

At the airfield our driver said, "You folks hear 'bout the place that blew up across town? Helluva explosion. One of them big private homes. Blew all to hell."

The private jet winged us to the U.S. and Stell Boyt's home. Piu

Ling slept and I brooded. The past had been exciting but what was ahead was disconcerting, and I waited until the cab was taking us to Stell before I asked Piu Ling, "How did you manage to keep your bra, doll?"

It surprised her.

"They stripped me," I said. "Why didn't they strip you?"

"But they did, Kevin!"

"Then why didn't they find the bra?"

"Well, they let me do that much. I mean they let me take it off, then they let me put it on again."

Stell didn't like it, either, when I told her.

Piu Ling had been sent off into another corner of the castle.

I said, "Stell-baby, it was too pat. Too easy. We never should've got out of there alive. Eiger isn't any novice trying to play spy. He knows his business. He wouldn't have let us escape. I've got a smelly hunch he sacrificed a couple of boys for a reason."

"Like being led back to what he wants?"

"Like."

"You know where that puts Piu Ling, of course."

"Yeah. She played a big role. She might be good on the stage. She's also a defector."

"Eiger puts cash on the line. Plenty of cash."

"Something. You're sure she's the right Piu Ling?"

"We'll ask Pegeen."

We did. Pegeen confirmed. "Yes, she is Piu Ling. Why?"

Stell gave me a significant look. "All right, Kevin-baby. Bring the film home to mama. Aloysius and the others will be waiting."

"I assume it still is to go to our friends."

"Eventually."

"Then why not leave it where it is?"

"Because I want it here."

"You'll take care of Piu Ling?"

"She'll get the best care in the world, darling."

"Sad," I said.

"I figured you'd know," Stell said, blank-faced.

And then Pegeen and I were winging toward Twenty-Nine. It was how Stell wanted it. Pegeen and I. Man and wife. I played it to the hilt, even up to registering

us into a motel unit—which is where Pegeen stopped me. "We have work to do. Remember?"

Reluctantly, I did.

Then we were in a cab and riding out to Aloysius Suchow. He met us at the door of his mortuary. He said, "How are you at grave-robbing, Indian?"

"Haven't in years."

"So you're out of practice."

I perspired robbing that grave. I used a shovel and I perspired. Aloysius watched me dig while Pegeen kept watch from behind the steering wheel of his car. We finally had Benjie and then I replaced the Lawn Hill Cemetery turf. When we returned to the mortuary, I draped Benjie over my shoulder and carried him inside.

Pegeen walked with me as if she was a guard. Aloysius remained with the car a few moments before he came inside. Pegeen walked behind us as we entered another room. It was crowded with people in white gowns who looked like doctors and nurses. Alysius told me to put Benjie on a long, bare table that was bathed with strong lights.

The people in white worked swiftly. A guy opened Benjie's scalp, peeled back skin and exposed the plates Benjie had earned in the Korean War. The guy separated two plates and took out three strips of microfilm.

And that was when Pegeen made her move.

She moved up beside me. She lifted her hands. Her fingers went into the hair piled high on top of her head. The fingers came out. They held a hand grenade. She pulled the pin of the grenade.

"Now," she said calmly, "I will take that film, please."

No one moved. No one made a sound.

"We all die or none die," said Pegeen.

"Just how much, doll," I asked politely, "did Eiger offer you and Piu Ling?"

"Enough." It was all she said.

And it was Aloysius who issued the command. "Give her the film."

I stared at him. I couldn't believe. He was going to let her get away with wholesale robbery!

The guy in white handed her the three strips of film and she backed from the room. I expected her to flip the grenade at any second. I was prepared to pounce on it. But she merely disappeared.

I lunged. Aloysius caught my arm, yanked me off my feet. I went down to the floor hard. He was beside me.

"Everybody down!" he bellowed.

They went with thuds.

"She's getting away!" I yelped.

Aloysius flopped his only arm across me, held me down. "Somebody had to know about you and Benjamin Indian!" he rasped. "Somebody had to identify you two to Piu Ling. No one else knew

who you were, who was going to make the trip here, how you were disguised—"

"Okay. So she had to be trapped, but now she's hightailing it!"

Suddenly there was a deafening roar and we were rocked with vibrations.

And then there was quiet.

Finally Aloysius broke the silence. He pushed up to his knees. "So much for one escape," he said and got to his feet.

And I knew why he had lingered at the car.

I knew who had tripped a time bomb.

"You played that one damned close, my friend," I said, standing beside him. "She could have pitched the grenade."

"She wasn't a mass murderer."

"You mean we can chalk one up to psychology?"

"Chalk it up to anything you will, Indian. You're alive, aren't you?"

"And the film?"

"Gone up in smoke, I imagine, but all that was on it was the ingredients for some very fancy cocktails."

"Then Benjie had two operations?"

Aloysius nodded. "The original before he was buried."

"And the formula?"

"Stell has had it since the night you brought Benjie to me."

"So the sole purpose of this trip was to get Pegeen to expose herself."

"It worked."

"Damn," I muttered, "someday that Stell wench is going to get me killed—and for nothing!"

"She could," Aloysius conceded. Then he grunted. "But I doubt if it will be for nothing. Not quite, anyway."

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HIS WIFE, SHARON, SURVIVES

by WALTER SNOW

She was everything a wife should be—and several things a wife shouldn't. She mocked his weakness, lived off his strength. She was selfish, vain, all evil. She—she'd be the death of him . . .

THE IDEA of staging a disappearance act would never have occurred to Howie Meek if, on a certain rainy afternoon in July, he had not faced the possibility of sudden death in a headline-making manner.

Mr. Meek—or rather, "Hey, Meek!" as he was known in his office—was a man of fixed habits and a martyr to duty. As such, he never consciously considered any of the various means of reachieving the dubious blessings of bachelorhood with one exception: when he was halfway through a suspense short story in which a husband has seemingly hit upon a perfect plan to dispose of his wife.

"I don't think he'll get away with it," Howie Meek would tell himself and add in a hopeful undertone, "or can he?"

For the highly moral purpose of discouraging domestic homicides, the fables always demonstrated how one telltale clue was overlooked and how the husband got his come-uppance. Also, the tales served the psychiatric purpose of relieving subconscious impulses. He felt gratified that each finale confirmed his foresight.

"No average man, especially a husband, can get away with murder," Howie said with growing conviction time and again. From that dogma he never wavered.

How, then, could he escape from a dead-end marriage? Shar-

on, fortyish, childless and a part-time saleslady in hoisery, had a conveniently weak heart that limited her working periods to Thursday nights, vacation substituting and Christmas duty. The mere mention of divorce might be enough to provoke a coronary that would necessitate weeks in bed. Consider last night.

When Howie came home, Sharon was in a seemingly good mood and didn't buzz with complaints during supper. Howie hurried through the dish-washing and then

entered his wife's bedroom. Sharon, as usual, was pillowed up in bed, munching chocolates and reading one of her favorite confession magazines.

"How many more pages to go?" he asked timidly.

"Half an hour at least. Anyway, I had a splitting headache in the afternoon, and it still isn't all gone. I'm sorry I can't be a good loving wife to my poor boy, for I'm still an invalid."

This, be it noted, is not intolerable cruelty in the legal definition required for divorce. Even though, in reality, it is, and more so.

Although Sharon relished illicit romance vicariously, she avoided even use of the harsher word, adultery, and would never furnish him with those grounds.

Actually she was hardly the type to sweep a Lothario off his feet. Her hair, blonde these past ten years, was stringy and brittle, the result of frequent strippings; her complexion was a sallow pink with the flesh becoming puffy around languid eyes and with a double chin developing.

During the past ten years she had attracted the extra-marital thoughts of just one man, the gas meter reader. He was plain wolf. If he had possessed even a faint shadow of a Marlon Brando face, he wouldn't have been worth the risk of losing a steady breadwinner.

Despite Howie's often enumerated shortcomings, Sharon was well aware he had attained the grade of assistant records coordinanator in the state civil service. It brought a salary that spelled extras for a sickly wife who was unable to work more than a few weeks each year and whose tastes were simple.

They were limited to week-end bingo at the South Essex volunteer fire department, an occasional dress-up feed at the Patrick J. O'Reilly Post, American Legion, daytime TV soapers and all of twenty-seven odd confession magazines every month. And there was Howie, who afforded the special pleasure of being someone to tease.

This habit brought on the crisis. On this particular July day, Howie opened his brief case, took out the mustard-smeared wax paper and gasped: "Oh, no, no! Not a spicefiery, gas-generating salami sandwich."

For a few seconds he debated eating only the bread. He had told Sharon repeatedly that he had an allergy to spicy food, that he preferred a simple cream cheese or even a peanut butter sandwich when there was no leftover turkey or a mild sandwich meat like olive loaf.

"Sharon gave me this salami just because she's on her three-day diet again and in a foul mood," he exclaimed.

Howie nibbled the bread, determined to drop the salami into the

waste basket. His stomach was growling from hunger, however, and he wondered if it had been calm enough for the past few hours to digest the salami. The trouble was that he liked it even if it didn't like him. He took a chance and a half hour later realized his mistake. The progression was from a sour taste in the mouth to the beginnings of an intestinal civil war. By two-thirty he was really in trouble.

When the pains began to stab his shoulder blades, criss-crossed his back and doubled him up, Howie sought out his boss and muttered, "Horrible gas attack. Need a Bromo."

Biting his lips as the elevator descended ten stories, he wondered if his gastro-enteritis—his doctor's phrase—wasn't a heart attack of a more violent kind than Sharon ever had. Why hadn't he left five minutes earlier?

The Capitol City Pharmacy was fifty yards from the door of the State Office Building. Howie made the emergency trip at least once during every one of the forty-nine working weeks in a year. Every one of the soda fountain employes reached for the squat blue bottle as soon as he stood framed in the doorway. But this rainy afternoon was the every-day situation that went wrong.

Howie was fifteen feet from the glass door when there was a strange, whooshing noise. It was a whistling rush of air, like the downsweep of a helicopter. Howie jumped back a step and narrowly missed being struck by two hundred pounds of human flesh and bone hurtling downward with the tremendous momentum of a plunge from a twelve-story roof. A "fall" or "jump" case, a suicide. It was nightmarish, the way Howie was spattered with blood and human mincemeat.

"What if I had taken one more step?" he gasped.

Two hours later, having completed official and unofficial statements, Howie was finally sitting alone on a bar stool. He was having another scotch and soda, his third. He had never dared to tackle even one in the last three months.

With his ears still ringing from the repeated exclamation, "You could have been killed yourself!" Howie reflected that but for one more step, but for the grace of God, Sharon would now be a widow. The idea that she might have had to get along alone was a startling one.

Howie Meek suddenly felt liberated. He decided that he no longer had to feel duty-bound to drudge on forever supporting Sharon in her laziness.

"If she has to go to work regularly," he reflected, "she'll lose some of that mountainous flabbiness. She won't be able to keep munching from a box of chocolates in a lingerie shop where sticky fin-

gers are taboo. The enforced denials would be better for her heart condition, if she really had one," he added in a whisper as if startled by such heresy.

Then the bold idea dawned. He remembered a Sunday feature about the Missing Persons bureau of a large city. It stated that the police seldom exerted themselves about the vast majority of disappearance cases. Only if there was a possibility of kidnaping or foul play, or if one were suspected of absconding with funds or was either very rich, very old or very young, would the police get excited.

Missing Persons bureaus never bothered with runaway husbands, it was recounted, unless they had abandoned small children.

Howie and Sharon were childless and they no longer had aged parents to support. If he left his new car—actually owned by the bank—behind, who would try to trace him? He mused on the problems that would face him.

"If I disappear, seemingly vanished off the face of the earth, and go to sunny California, I'll lose my Civil Service status. I'll have to start at the bottom. That will mean a thirty-dollar weekly cut in salary. But, hell, if I don't have to support Sharon I won't need that extra thirty. Still, I can't leave her penniless. I'll have to figure out a plan."

The big thing was that he could be free. Having time to reflect, with no office problems, no daily paper and no Sharon around to distract his attention, he was once again aghast at the slavery he had endured. That morning, for example, Sharon grudgingly had permitted him to kiss her with a quick peck and give her a single pat. He had gone through the morning's drudgery with ideas about the coming night. He knew that it was to one that Sharon would plead a pain in her heart and say she was sorry to disappoint him again.

From a telephone booth, Howie called his home. "I'm eating out, Sharon," he announced and then hung up quickly.

He drove to a night spot, where he started out with two Martinis, very dry, and then progressed from a shrimp cocktail to a charcoal broiled steak and finally strawberry shortcake. He had a cordial afterwards, listening to a little blonde song stylist who appeared with the five-piece combo. He rather hoped that she would glide by his back-of-the room table and blow him a kiss, as she did to those just outside the velvet rope. But he was a realist.

"I'm not lonely," he told himself. "If I want a woman, well, this waitress is more my speed."

She was edging forty, rather buxom and also had stringy blonde hair. He had a few words with her as each course was served. He tipped her a dollar more than his usual fifteen per cent and then

cursed himself under his breath. The waitress was Sharon five years younger and twenty pounds lighter.

"In California," he said, "the waitresses will be different."

Registered in a motel under an assumed name, Howie congratulated himself on having performed two smart acts. One was the decision to spend the night away from home; the other was the purchase of a pint. Assured of a night of quick and sound sleep, he pictured the four stages Sharon was going through.

First there must have been a period of wild rage when she had cursed him for going to a "feed" without her.

Sharon also had raged because faithful servant Howie wasn't on hand to do the dinner dishes, feed her two mongrel cats, take the garbage out and do little things around the house, such as fixing the torn carpeting at the top of the stairs. She'd storm around the two downstairs rooms, the combination kitchen-dinette and TV for quite awhile.

When the six to seven news hour was over on TV, she'd settle down to watch her early Monday evening paper during the commercials. The story of the suicide and how Howard Meek was almost killed was on the front page, but there was a good chance she would miss it, since she merely read the woman's page, the non-sensational obituaries and tut-tutted over the divorce news.

The husband of one of her ladies' auxiliary buddies would call out, "Hey, listen to this. Howie Meek had a close call."

There would then be a period of mounting anxiety. Sharon was a woman who never had an idea that

did not concern her own desires or welfare. She might even wonder what thoughts passed through the mind of a man who was almost killed. She would go upstairs and from the front bedroom window watch for his car.

"Maybe I've been a bit too nasty," she might say, adding under her breath, "for my future security."

The fourth stage would come when, with the sacrificial air of a vestal virgin, she would don that black semi-transparent nightgown, that seldom-used present from Howie, and would recline in front of the television downstairs like a forgiving Penelope awaiting the return of her Ulyssess.

"This one-time male fly," Howie proclaimed to the four walls of his motel room, "isn't going to walk into the parlor of the black widow spider. The name isn't Howie Meek any longer. It's Howard Masters!"

That was the name under which he was registered. It was a guarantee that he wouldn't be tracked down. It was also an old second self from many daydreams, a forceful Bengal Lancerish guy, who was occasionally decorated by generals and more often was kissed by *Playboy* cuties.

Howard Masters continued to play it smart the next morning. It was necessary to visit his bank to secure going-away money, but the safe deposit key was at home. Neither he nor Sharon had a savings account; his wife was constitutionally unable to put a few dollars aside each week for that proverbial day of changed weather. The old Bengal Lancer had one secret during the past three years since the death of a maiden aunt—a little legacy put aside in a safe deposit box registered to himself.

Now he telephoned the president of the Legion Auxiliary.

"This is Howie," he said in a deliberately faint voice. "I'm in the County Hospital. I don't want to worry Sharon, but I've suffered a bit of a shock."

He heard the auxiliary officer cluck with knowledge from the evening paper.

"I won't be discharged for another day," Howie continued. "Could you pick up Sharon and bring her to Room O O seven—I mean seventy-seven?"

Hanging up, he felt the seeming authenticity of the message would keep either woman from checking at the hospital by telephone to see if the were really there.

Howard Masters waited in a side street until the two auxiliary biddies raced off for the hospital. Luck was with him. The next door neighbor didn't see him drive up and later depart with a suitcase and with an extra pair of slacks and a sports jacket slung carelessly over his arm.

His plan was simple. South Essex is a Connecticut River town and the long river, as the Indians once called it, is broad and deep as it flows down to Long Island Sound. He had gone swimming in it since boyhood.

He knew one favorite spot where he would abandon his car and leave the clothes he was supposedly wearing. In the locked glove compartment he'd leave his insurance policies.

"Sharon," he mused, "won't grieve too much if she can collect double indemnity under my big policy, plus a whole year's salary from my State policy. Then the equity in the house—"

This reflection salved his conscience and he no longer felt it was

a sneaky trick to run out on his wife.

The solution to the transportation problem was a nearby farmer who drove a truckload of produce to Hartford as regularly as clockwork twice a day. Howie would hop in the back with his suitcase and no one would remember him hailing a cab for the trip from the Hartford produce market to the railroad station. It was dubious, in these automobile days, if he would be reported getting on a New York, New Haven and Hartford train. The idea wouldn't occur to anyone, since he was a motorist. He would buy the big ticket in New York for his real destination, California.

The spot Howie picked for his supposed last swim was a shady nook where three tall weeping willows leaned over the sparkling waters. Few kids swam there because it was too great a distance from town for walking or even bicycling. Its loveliness and isolation made it a lover's lane. As Howie draped a complete suit of clothes, from shoes and socks to the extra sports jacket and slacks in his soon-to-be abandoned car, he remembered how more than twenty years ago he had driven a then young and slender Sharon out here.

"Mustn't think of that," he muttered. He made a last check to be sure he had not overlooked a big item. The car keys were in the pocket of the slacks. He even left a Turkish towel on the front seat. The picture clicked. This was just what might have happened if a middle-aged chap, suffering from that shock and feeling nostalgic, had decided to seek relief from the humid July heat by going for a dip in the nude in the ole swimming hole.

Of course poor Howie, portly and almost pot-bellied himself now, couldn't cope with the river tides as he did in his youth. It was sad but he would be drowned.

Howie picked up his suitcase and started walking over the knoll towards the produce farmer's. The river, shimmering in blue-green, did look inviting.

He started through the waist-high grass when he heard voices. He stopped, hidden by a willow trunk, but saw he was almost on top of a lover's lane couple. The girl lay on almost the same mound where Sharon had once stretched out.

Howie stood there, listening, watching, an accidental and involuntary Peeping Tom. He felt a flush in his cheeks and the fever rising in his blood. He remembered the loveliness that had once been Sharon, except perhaps for a perpetual petulant mouth.

Howie veered to the right and tried to tramp ahead. He must remember that his plans were perfect and that he was on the verge of winning freedom. He told himself

he must never return to the old web of his black widow.

Howie plunged on and left the lovers behind. Then, cutting like a knife through his resolve was the memory of Sharon as she had been —as she still might be.

His will to flee collapsed like a burst bubble. The blood pounded in his veins. The terrible urge again dominated him. He went back to his car.

TURNING OFF into the side street that spelled home, Howie had a moment of uncertainty. What if Sharon, angered over the false summons to the County Hospital, would have a temper tantrum? Well, he could always turn around and carry out his original disappearance plan.

Home was the left side of a two-story brick duplex. There was a front lawn exactly the same size as his combination television-living room. The Meeks and their neighbors each had two rooms downstairs, the other being a combination kitchenette-dinette, and two upstairs. The large front bedroom, which had a huge clothes closet, was Sharon's; the smaller rear one, curtailed to make space for the bathroom, was Howie's. The front door of the left duplex was opening, he suddenly saw.

Sharon stood framed in the doorway with the light behind giving a warm glow to her scarlet of a bathrobe. Howie remembered it was soft and slinky, almost velvety. There was no top button, leaving a low V-neckline that partly disclosed the cleft in the ample bosom. A touch of black over the bosom indicated Sharon was wearing the peak-a-boo nightgown, that birthday present from Howie.

As Howie hurried up the little cement walk, he noticed an unpleasant twisting of Sharon's mouth. Then she bit her lower lip and ran her tongue around to offer a moist mouth. Plump arms were outstretched as he reached the threshold.

"Oh, my poor boy!" exclaimed Sharon. "My poor, shocked boy."

The embrace had a promise to equal the feverish fantasy by the riverside. There was a liquorish taste to Sharon's mouth but soon she was offering a double on the rocks: "You want to catch up with me, Honey?"

Howie took a big gulp, which set him coughing, then tossed off the rest in two more stiff swallows. There was another double before Sharon suggested that the downstairs couch was nowhere near as comfortable as the bed. They went up the stairs, swaying and embracing.

Howie loosened a shoe-lace, but as he reached for the second another double on the rocks was forced on him.

He tried to kiss her but she said, "Not yet, you naughty boy. Where have you been?"

"Just driving around. I was in a sort of daze."

"But why did you send me off on a wild goose chase to the County Hospital? We were afraid you'd been in a real serious accident."

"I—I guess the shock of facing sudden death gave me a brainstorm."

"You mean strange ideas? You were seen entering the Middlesex County Bank and Trust Company."

That damned auxiliary friend of hers at the Christmas Club window, thought Howie.

"If you must know," Began Howie. "I went to the vault for all my insurance policies. I was going to leave them for you and disappear." For a moment, Howie felt he had blabbered too much already but the drinks dulled his sense of caution.

"I was going to fake a disappearing act," he blurted out. "Pretend I'd gone for a dip in the river and had drowned. Then I planned to adopt another name and head for California."

"You mean you really wanted to drop out of my life? But why? Haven't I given you the best years of my life?"

"It was just a brainstorm. I had this guy dropping dead in front of me and I was thinking—"

"But what would have become of me? If you'd disappeared how would I have lived? Your insurance money would last me only a few years and what then?"

"There's quite a lot of insurance for folks in our circumstances. My big policy spells twenty-four thousand dollars double indemnity. You'll also get an extra seventy-five thousand dollars, equal to a year's salary, from the State policy. We owe the bank two thousand six hundred six on the new car, supposedly thirty-five more monthly payments, but the time-payment plan is an insured one.

"Just think—thirty-five months of installments paid off in one swoop. The car would be free and clear before it needs its first replacement of spark-plugs. Then consider this two-family house. You could easily realize sixteen thousand dollars above the mortgage. If you sold the house and car, you'd have a whopping total of fifty thousand dollars."

"At five thousand a year, it would only last me ten years."

"Not if you invested everything in preferred stocks at five per cent."

"M-m-mum," mused Sharon. "That would come to fifty dollars a week. I'd still have to work two or three days. I need seventy-five to eighty dollars a week. Still—But what about you? If you gave me everything, how would you get to California? How'd you live for a couple of weeks until you landed a job?"

"I'd make out somehow."

Sharon poured another drink and took a sip herself; she'd been hardly moistening her lips, determined to keep her wits sharp. At last she hit on an idea.

"Tell me, did your Aunt Tillie leave just a burial policy, or did you have something left over?"

Howie was too on-the-rocky to realize the necessity for evasion until it was too late.

"You mean," exclaimed Sharon," that you had five thousand dollars hidden away—five thousand dollars in hard cash, instant money—and you didn't let me know about it for three years?"

Sharon glided over to her dressing cabinet, grabbed a bottle of barbituates and dissolved three into a glass. An hour later, when Howie was snoring, deft fingers reached into a back pants pocket to see if wallet contained the five thousand dollars legacy in cash. There were nine one hundred dollar bills and five twenties. The inside pocket of his jacket, kept tight by safety pins, held the rest of the hoard.

Next Sharon slipped a coat over her bathrobe, carefully avoided the frayed carpet at the top of the stairs and went outside to the car to verify that the insurance policies were in the glove compartment.

Howie's half-hearted attempts to undress had proceeded no further than loosening one shoe lace. It seemed a pity that today marked the last time that she would be able to frustrate him. She realized that her errant husband's next disappearance mood would be stronger and so a job had to be done. She did it methodically, as if once again being compelled to down a dose of castor oil.

She dragged the limp body to the top of the stairs, avoided the torn spot in the carpet, and gave Howie a final shove. The doped torso clumped down the steps but the head missed the bottom bannister post. Howie lay sprawled in a heap, groaning. Sharon bent over and felt through the graying hair in vain for a spot of blood. That sneaky Howie, that crafty plotter, only had a possible fracture of one arm.

Sharon fetched her heavy electric steam iron—

The grieving widow, two months later, was cheered somewhat by being elected president of the Ladies' Auxiliary to the Patrick J. O'Reilly Post. The whole town of South Essex, the distaff side at least, says it's marvelous how well Sharon has borne up under her tragedy.

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SEARCH FOR AN ACHILLES HEEL

He was too big to hurt, too tough to kill.
How can you take care of an evil like that?
Then, remembering a girl, he suddenly knew . . .

by JAMES McKIMMEY

EMANUEL PARTRIDGE drew an unsteady line across a blank sheet of paper until his fingers were unable to grip the pencil any longer. Then he got up, a short, balding man with pale skin, and walked beside the long line of drawing boards to the front of the large room. He stopped at Miss Glass' desk before Laurence Dexter's office.

"I want to see Mr. Dexter," he said in a foggy voice.

Miss Glass' long fingers stopped against the keys of her typewriter. Thin and frozen-faced, she looked at him with the sharp disdain of an executive secretary. Partridge had never liked her, and the feeling was compounded this morning.

"What about?" she asked frostily. "Mr. Dexter is busy."

"My fuse!"

She snapped a switch on her intercom. "Mr. Partridge wishes to see you about his fuse, Mr. Dexter."

There was silence. Then a soft, cultivated voice replied, "Send him in."

Partridge opened the door of the office, and Laurence Dexter looked up behind his wide desk. Two leather chairs were placed at angles in front of the desk. Dexter motioned toward one of them, his manicured nails gleaming softly. Partridge sat down, heart pounding.

Dexter leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head. He was a lean man of forty-one with touches of gray in his otherwise black hair. He wore an expensive

A fast-paced crime thriller.

mohair suit fitted exactly to his athletic frame. His handsome face was flushed from a generous consumption of after-work liquor.

"What is it about the fuse, Partridge?"

"It's my fuse," Partridge managed. "I invented it!"

Dexter let his breath out gently, then leaned forward to rest his palms on his desk. "Partridge, try to keep your voice down. I've given you my personal congratulations for your contribution to the growth and expansion of Dexter Products, Incorporated. I've also told you that I was putting your name in for a five-dollar raise."

"A five-dollar raise!" Partridge said excitedly. "That fuse would have returned me at least a quarter of a million dollars!"

Dexter's well-molded head moved back and forth. "But you don't own the patent, Partridge. I do."

"It isn't right!"

"You signed a waiver when you joined this company. Any development, invention, et cetera, produced by any employee while under active employment becomes the property of Dexter Products."

"But I invented the fuse on my own time!"

"That's covered in the waiver."

Partridge could feel even his head trembling. "I'll see a lawyer about this."

"Partridge," Dexter said coolly, "you are trying my patience. You have been here for fifteen years now. You began as a design engineer, demonstrating somewhat questionable talents for the job. Though we've left you in this capacity, you have shown no notable signs of improvement. Please don't tax my patience. I might not only change my mind about that raise, I might very well reconsider the value of your remaining in my employment. To be quite blunt, your talents are rather mediocre."

"My talents produced that fuse! You're going to profit a quarter of a million dollars because of it! Don't you think I could use more money than a five-dollar raise? I've got a family!"

"I rather think that fuse may well have been the accidental culmination of all that you might be able to offer. I don't think you're going to repeat. That fuse is mine now. The only one you own is the one inside of you. I am growing weary of your blowing it in my presence. Why don't you take the rest of the day off and try to get hold of yourself? Come back in better shape tomorrow, Partridge, so you can show something for I'm paying you."

Partridge walked slowly across the parking lot, moving as though in a dream. The sky was flatly gray. There was the moistness of impending rain in the air. The regular lines of the plant's sand-colored structure stretched behind him. The interior of that plant had

become a comfort to him over the past ten years, a haven of security. Now he hated it. He got into his six-year-old sedan and drove out of the lot.

A half hour later he was seated in the spare, cluttered-looking office of Douglas Culbreth, Attorney at Law, who sat behind his untidy desk, reading the waiver Partridge had given him.

At last his narrow, sparsely haired head began to wag. He looked up dolefully.

"I'm sorry, Partridge. There's nothing you can do."

"But a quarter of a million dollars! I've got to fight him!"

"I know Laurence Dexter," Culbreth said grimly. "He trusts nobody. That's why he used the long vision, as in this case, to protect himself. He is shrewd. He is also extremely vain. I have a feeling that it won't be long before he'll be believing that he invented that fuse himself. Most importantly, he is viciously ruthless. Which is why he has built Dexter Products into what it is today."

"I suppose," Partridge said in a voice that kept jumping in range, "that the insurance money he got from his father's death has nothing to do with it!"

"He was left a half million, that's true. But he knew what to do with it. I suppose being bitter in that fashion may vent a bit of spleen, Mr. Partridge. But it won't change the situation."

HE PARKED the car in his driveway and looked at the old frame house beneath the foliage of two tall elms. Beyond a picket fence, in the back yard, he saw his two oldest sons playing catch. The German shepherd romped back and forth, chasing the ball. A black cat sat precariously between fence pickets and watched with owlish calm.

He had always loved this house, a good, lived-in, practical house, a sanctuary, as the plant had been. But today he could see that it had grown old and needed paint. The shouts of his sons, normally welcome sounds, grated against his nerves. The bounding of the big dog seemed foolish.

When he walked into the house, the three youngest children, a boy and two girls, came shouting and running to him, hugging his legs and yanking at his hands. He moved with difficulty to sit down in his easy chair. A white cat jumped down the fireplace mantle and into his lap. The dachshund appeared from the kitchen and put its front paws on his hassock to lick his right hand. A canary, perched high in a cage, sang merrily over the din.

Dora appeared from the kitchen, a small woman with pink cheeks and mussed graying hair. She wiped her hands woodenly with a towel. "He fired you, didn't he?"

"No," Partridge said loudly, "he

didn't! He simply gave me the rest of the day off. I still have the five-dollar raise."

She sat down on a small stool and began crying against her towel.

"I remember what a raise used to mean around here!"

"Five dollars!" Her voice came to him, muffled and wrenched with anguish. He stared at her, thinking that their marriage had been beautifully successful until he had perfected his fuse, then attempted to patent it and sell it to Dexter Products—accomplishing neither.

"Why do you cry like that?" he said. "We haven't lost anything. What if I hadn't designed the fuse in the first place?"

"There's no use thinking that way!" she said hysterically.

The children hung to him, and the cat purred loudly in his lap. The dachshund kept licking his hand. His youngest daughter was talking to him furiously; he had rarely been able to understand what it was she talked about. He freed himself and walked out through the kitchen to the garage which he had converted into his beloved workshop. There was his small drawing board, where he had spent so many good hours. There was his work bench with all of the neatly pegged tools. And, in the center of the bench, was a model of the fuse. He picked it up and threw it against a wall, where it shattered.

He sat down limply at the drawing board. He stared ahead blankly for a long time. Finally he closed his hands into fists. He got up and returned to the living room. "He's got to have an Achilles heel. I'm going to find it! Then I'm going to rip him apart."

"You never ripped anybody apart in your life!" Dora said shrilly.

He stared at her in astonishment.

"How about that first job you had, at Wicket and Son?" she said. "How about that?"

"Well, how about it!"

"They promised to make you a design engineer. For the next five years you sat there as a simple, ordinary draftsman, complaining to me very night of every week that they weren't keeping their word. After five years you quit. What did the chief engineer tell you? He said, 'Em, why didn't you tell me we'd promised you that?

" 'We just forgot.' That's what he said! They would have given it to you right then and there. Only you were mad and you had to quit and go to work for Laurence Dexter. Now look what's happened!"

"You've never talked to me this way before!"

"It's time I did! For twenty-two years I've watched you come home and listened to you talking as though you were a wolf in sheep's clothing, as though underneath you were a tiger! Well, you're not

a tiger, Tiger. Forget that quarter of a million dollars. Kiss it off!" She stumbled to their bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

THE RAIN came with early evening, then the sky cleared. A white moon shone on the west edge of the city, where Emanuel Partridge walked slowly up the long drive toward a massive house. He stopped in front of a white door, narrow shoulders slumped beneath his rumpled sports jacket. He pressed the buzzer button.

Moments later, a slim young man with a weak chin and sleepy eyes opened the door. He wore an expensive blue blazer and gray slacks with practiced nonchalance. He stared at Partridge without interest.

"I'd like to see Mr. Dexter."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then I suggest you make one, with Miss Glass, his secretary."

"I know all about Miss Glass. Please tell him that Mr. Partridge is here."

The young man stood there a moment longer, then shut the door. Partridge waited without motion until it was opened again. The young man said, "This way."

Partridge followed him through a rich foyer, into a giant living room. One side was entirely glass, facing the swimming pool outside. The room was dimly lit, and the view of the water catching the

moonlight outside was excellent. Laurence Dexter was stretched out in a leather chair, glass in hand. He looked at Partridge with angry, moist eyes.

"I think you've gone too far, Partridge, invading the privacy of my home!"

Partridge held up a hand, shyly. "I've come to apologize."

Dexter stared at him with surprise, then with suspicion.

"I lost my head this morning. It's true that I invented that fuse at home. But I did it with knowledges and abilities acquired, in the main, during my employment at Dexter Products. Without you, sir, it would never have been accomplished. If I may say so, it was as though you were the one who made that fuse possible. I know that now. I realize that your giving me good security, now the raise, all of it, have been the honest values in my life. I was nothing less than a damned fool to have acted in the fashion I did."

"I agree. I'm glad you saw the light, Partridge."

"Yes, sir. I'm very sorry to have bothered you."

"It's all right."

"But—there is something else."

Suspicion returned to Dexter's eyes. "Yes?" he asked coldly.

"Well, it's quite true that my family is growing. We do need more money. I wouldn't expect more for my work at the plant than the five-dollar raise, now that I've come to my senses. But I was thinking I might be of some service to you here, sir. After hours, that is."

"What kind of service?"

"I'm rather handy with my hands. Sweep. Pick up. Repair. Dust. That sort of thing."

Dexter shook his head. "You'd do that for a little more money?"

"Yes, sir."

"Horace, my nephew here, keeps things going."

"But another part-time hand wouldn't hurt, Uncle Laurence," Horace said hopefully.

"I'd like to add something else, Mr.Dexter," Partridge said. "I believe I've learned something from my experience with the fuse. Somehow I've failed to develop properly in all areas, including attitude. And it just seems to me the best man in this world to learn from, to develop just a bit more of the executive attitude, would be Mr. Laurence Dexter. I'm sure it sounds a bit silly, but it would mean a great deal to me."

Laurence Dexter sat silently, watching Partridge with steady eyes. "Dollar and a half an hour. No more."

"Fair enough, sir."

Dexter lifted his glass. "Fix me a fresh drink. Two jiggers bourbon, two cubes ice. Soda."

"Yes, sir," Partridge said, and hurried with the glass to the bar built into one wall. He made the drink quickly and gave it to Dexter.

"Now give Horace a hand at whatever he wants you to do. When you finish, come back in here. I'll try to give you a few minutes."

"Yes, sir," Partridge said.

After washing dishes, scrubbing the kitchen floor, sweeping out the garage and sharpening several knives, Partridge returned to the living room. He could see that Dexter's eyes were even more moist; his mouth was curled loosely.

Dexter raised his glass, failing to offer Partridge a drink. "Here's to new understanding."

"Quite right."

"Sit down there and tell me what made you see the light?"

Partridge seated himself beside a round oak table and said, "You can't hide from truth very long, you know."

"Wise of you, Partridge. You do feel that I'm honestly credited with the development of that fuse?"

"I do—now. It would be foolish to evade it."

"You know, Partridge, I suppose

a lot of you people might look upon my life with a certain envy. But if you're in my position, you lead a lonely life. I don't know if you understand that. Matter of fact, I imagine certain of you might downright hate my guts."

"I can't believe that's true, Mr. Dexter."

"I didn't mean to include you, Partridge. But there must be a number."

"In my fifteen years with you, I've only heard you spoken of in the greatest terms of respect."

Dexter laughed softly, pushed himself out of his chair. "Your wife isn't worried about you?" he asked.

"She's never concerned about my time."

"You're a lucky man, Partridge. Hang on there." He left the room unsteadily.

Horace appeared from the kitchen and sat down on the opposite side of the table. He leaned an arm carelessly on the surface. "You did those jobs well. I admire a man without false pride."

"I'm glad to be here."

"Is that really true what you told him? Nobody in the plant hates his guts?"

"I've never heard of it."

"That's rather fantastic, when you think about it."

"But I don't believe Mr. Dexter is the usual man, Horace."

"True enough," Horace nodded slowly. "But now do you honestly mean that you feel no malice about the fuse?"

"How could I, facing the matter honestly? After all, I own the pride of knowing that it will go into production. I now have a certain status, you understand. It'll be generally kown that the fuse was the result of my own labor, though, of course, whatever skill and experience that went into it can be attributed to Mr. Dexter."

"But haven't there been just a few who've come up and said, 'You're a bloody ass, Partridge, to have signed that waiver and given Dexter the right to the patent?' I mean, you can level with me. I don't really count."

"We all sign the waiver, Horace. It's a part of the terms. Perhaps one or two did comment something like that. But, you see, engineering is a profession, like medicine. When a physician perfects a new serum, he doesn't necessarily think in terms of profit. Perhaps he most prefers to write up his offering in a medical journal, so that other doctors might know what he has done. That's all I ask. Respect from my fellow professionals."

When Laurence Dexter returned to the room, Partridge got up swiftly to mix him a new drink. He listened to Horace saying, "Partridge was just saying, Uncle Laurence, that his greatest pride with the fuse was the hope that he might be able to gain the respect of his fellow professionals."

"Good viewpoint," Dexter said, taking the glass from Partridge. "I'm beginning to have hope for you. This wife of yours, for instance. Seems to give you incentive."

"Well, sir," Partridge said, "Dora's been my little girl for twenty-two years now."

"Married to the same woman for twenty-two years? Astonishing."

"It's been good going every foot of the way."

Dexter shook his head. "Three marriages for me. All disasters." Horace drifted out of the room. "You said you had children?"

"Three boys and two girls."

"Good Lord. You watch a man working, and you don't really know anything about him. Are they good children?"

"The best. I also have two dogs, two cats, and one canary."

Dexter laughed drunkenly. "I'm going to try to help you along, Partridge. Listen to me—and carefully."

"I will, sir."

Dexter's eyes glowed wisely. "A business, Partridge, must be a complete effort—nothing else. That is my credo, you understand? Maybe my father gave me a little start in the beginning. But he made me learn the hard way, God rest his soul. I did. Dexter Products, as it is today, is the result.

"Let's take a specific. The practice I initiated, for example, of offering a quick system of cashing payroll checks right in the plant every Friday morning. It might seem a lot of unnecessary expense to have that money brought into the plant by the bank. But look beneath the surface. A survey showed that before the new system was initiated better than eighty-five percent of the entire personnel was broke by Friday morning. Then, checks were distributed just before quitting time on Fridays; off they went, to spend money everywhere but in the plant. Now look what's happened."

"I'm listening carefully," Partridge said.

"The vending machines, which I own, were almost unused every Friday. Soft drinks. Soups. Candy bars. Cigarettes. Now they're doing a booming business. The company cafeteria was a wasteland on Friday noons—shop personnel bringing their lunches, secretaries going without. Now it thrives. Do you see what I'm talking about, Partridge? No stone overturned. The complete effort."

Partridge nodded, smiling admiringly. "I've got to hand it to you, sir."

"Well," Dexter said, his voice turning reflective, "perhaps I learned some of that in the beginning during World War Two. Were you in the war, Partridge?"

"Afraid I missed it, sir. I was working in essential industry."

"Well, I could have too. But by

God, Partridge, I enlisted. And, as a company commander, I went right into the foray. Right into the fracus! Complete!" He began swinging his glass rhythmically. Finally he sang, "I'll be seeing you . . ." He put his glass down gently. He tilted his head back. He fell asleep.

WHEN Partridge stepped into his bedroom, he watched Dora turn in her bed and look at him with reddened eyes. She drew in a long breath, nostrils flaring. "You've been out half the night!"

"So I have."

"I suppose you were trying to make an ass of yourself in the neighborhood travens."

"I wasn't in the neighborhood taverns. I happened to be in the home of Mr. Laurence Dexter. I've got some extra work now. Evenings. Odd jobs around his house. A dollar and a half an hour."

"Oh, you fool!" she managed.

The next morning, when he'd completed his chores, Partridge sat beside the round oak table, listening attentively to Laurence Dexter.

"You see," Dexter said, drink in hand, "business is war. Some try to make it out to be an honorable affair, for the sake of their egos. But I'm honest. I say you've got to poke the finger in the eye when you get the chance. Do you follow me, Partridge?"

"Yes, sir. I think I'm learning quite a lot."

"I hope so." He motioned his glass and stood up. Partridge hurried to take it.

"Hang on there," Dexter said, and weaved out of the room. Partridge mixed a fresh drink.

Horace appeared and sat down beside the round table, saying: "Nice to have you around this way. You're being a great help to me. I'm—well, not very ambitious, as I guess you might suspect. And Uncle Laurence likes to talk to someone other than me. I'm not much good. I bore him. He does have a lonely life, you know."

"In his position, I can understand. Everybody trying to get something from him, I suspect."

"Precisely. Maybe you've noticed that he particularly likes to talk about the war. You believe all that, don't you? About his combat experience?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"There was a rumor spread a time ago that he went into combat, then conked out in twenty-four hours. Deserted his men. Had to be sent back to England to recover."

'It sounds like a rumor, all right. A vicious one."

"You've never heard it at the plant?"

"Certainly not," he said, remembering when a draftsman named Tedley had repeated that to him one noon in the parking lot. Tedley

had delivered the story outside, because it was common knowledge that the entire plant was bugged. You couldn't fool engineers about something like that.

"Some people believe those things," Horace said. "Probably started by some malcontent."

"Well, they exist. But no sensible person would believe it. Obviously Mr. Dexter could never play any role but the heroic one." He sat silently for a moment, then said, "Where does he go, by the way?"

"Has a dressing room and study down the hallway. Combs his hair. That sort of thing."

"I see," Partridge said agreeably. Horace was gazing at his fingernails, stifling a yawn. Partridge reached out casually to rest a hand on the oak table. Gradually he let his fingers drift to the undersurface. He touched a small mike secured in a recess and brought his hand back to his lap, smiling genially.

"You know, I noticed when Mr. Dexter opened the door to the hall that it's one of those lovely parquet surfaces. It might stand a good waxing. Perhaps I should have a go at it tomorrow evening."

"Mr. Partridge," Horace said, "you are priceless."

When Dexter returned to the room, he sat down and said, "I tell you, Partridge, war was hell. But if you're an officer, as I was, you thought of your boys first and yourself second. Took it on head first, with no thought of personal safety. But there were lighter aspects. The gay moments. In London, I remember . . ." His words meshed together. ". . . beautiful song, really . . ." He put down his glass and fell asleep smiling.

Partridge waxed half the length of the long hall's parquet the next evening. Then he stopped, listened carefully, and finally opened the fourth door on the left. One wall of the room was a large mirror in front of which was a dressing table; on its surface were hair creams, combs and brushes. There was also an elaborate desk on which was seated a small electric typewriter, dictating machine and phone.

Hanging above, on the wall, was a picture of an older man who closely resembled Laurence Dexter, with a written inscription: "Get 'em, son!"

Partridge peered under the dressing table. A small loudspeaker hung beneath the surface. He turned its switch and heard, "Let's have a fresh drink, Horace. Why don't you put a little snap in it, the way Partridge does?"

An hour later Partridge sat watching Dexter respectfully.

"You've got the right life, Partridge. I envy you. I truly do. But what were we talking about last night? Oh, yes. The war. Pure hell. Nobody to help you there. You didn't say, 'Dad, I need a little help on this one.' You did it on your

own. But, on the other hand, there were times in the pubs. Girls. Everyone singing. Chin up. All that. I always remember a song . . ."

Partridge watched him with bright eyes.

Weeks later, he sat at his work bench, gently inserting thin wires into a detached typewriter platen. He paused in his labor to munch at a sandwich, then returned to the platen. Dora appeared and looked at him accusingly. "You don't even have time to eat dinner with us any more."

"Another ten minutes, and I'll have this finished."

"Whatever it is. Then it's back to sucking around that—"

"I don't like that kind of language."

"Not even the children make any difference to you now."

"I'm fighting him."

"You're a fool."

"Am I?" He smiled and reached over to tap a small tape recorder. "Do you know what I'm doing?"

"Kidding yourself."

He turned a switch. There sounded the soft voice of Laurence Dexter: "Let's get some wood into the fireplace, Horace, and be quick about it . . ." He snapped the switch off. "Do you know what that is?" he asked.

"I don't care what it is."

"Laurence Dexter speaking in his living room. I'm fighting fire with fire. He's got the plant bugged. He listens to my conversations with Horace from his study. Now I've got his entire house covered, with the best equipment. I've got bugs in his bedroom, his study, his living room, his kitchen—even his bathroom. I'm picking everything up from outside. I've got tapes that'll run from a half-dozen places—radio pick-ups, from a crotch in his elm tree, to—"

"Do you think I haven't seen what's happening to what little savings we had? To buy all of that junk!"

"It isn't junk! He'll make his mistake one of these days. I'll pick it up on tape. A man like that? There's got to be something that'll ruin him. I'll find it."

"You're going to ruin your job! He'll find that junk. He'll know who put it there. Then he'll fire you!"

Partridge touched the platen tenderly. "With this, it'll be complete."

"Oh, you are so hopeless!" she shouted, and left, blinded by fresh tears.

A month later Partridge returned to his workshop and replayed a dozen tapes. There was nothing, not a flaw exposed. He reexamined the sheets of paper on which he'd translated the signals sent from the keys striking the typewriter platen. He touched his forehead, feeling defeated. That platen arrangement had been so ingenious, nearly as much so as the fuse.

But it had returned him nothing. He had discovered that Dexter never used the typewriter for correspondence, but simply typed notes to himself, which he later destroyed. It was a device for sharpening thoughts, memory. He read again the typed notations:

"Too thin in production expansion. Tighten up. Or increase capital. How?"

"Daphne will go."

"O—N. Change to 8, 42, 11, 31."

"Esther will go."

"Is Partridge a beaver? Or a fool? Answer known."

So they went, giving him nothing at all. Stubbornly he went back to the tapes, replaying one, then another. Finally he stopped.

Dora came in to stare at him bitterly. "Where's the Achilles heel?"

"He's got to have one!"

"But you can't find it, can you?"

"Time. That's all it takes."

"Why can't you understand that he's got you whipped! Give it up!"

"I found out why Horace works for him that way, takes all he does! He used to be in the plant, in the accounting department. He doctored some books to get some cash. Dexter found out. Instead of having him prosecuted, he took the books for evidence and put them in the company vault. That's how he's held him all these years."

"What good does that do! Horace is a nobody! Give up, Partridge!"

"I've got to go over there," Partridge said sullenly.

"Idiot."

"PARTRIDGE," Dexter called, as he entered the house. "Come in here and pour me a drink."

"Yes, sir," Partridge said.

"Pour yourself one too."

Partridge looked at him in astonishment. The living room was, for a change, brightly lit, giving it a different look.

"You've been working hard. Time to relax."

"Special occasion, sir?"

"Nothing except there's a time to work, a time to play. Horace!"

Horace appeared from the kitchen.

"Where are the girls?"

"They should arrive in about five minutes."

Horace disappeared, and Partridge, astonished again, said, "Girls?"

Dexter winked and poked a fist gently into Partridge's middle as he took his drink. "You don't have anything against girls, do you, Partridge?"

"Well, sir—" He coughed nervously. "I'm a married man, you know. And—"

"How can a little fun on the side hurt a good marriage, Partridge? Tell me that."

"Well, sir—"

"Sit down, Partridge. Drink up. Relax."

Minutes later Horace escorted

two girls into the room. One was small and dark-haired with a high-pitched giggle. The other was tall and blond, with a booming laugh and an extraordinary body displayed in a tight blue dress.

"Esther there," Dexter said, nodding toward the smaller girl. "And that's Daphne. Horace, fix the girls a drink. This is going to be an evening!"

"Oh, you!" shrieked Esther.

"Oh, you, *yes!*" boomed Daphne, looking at Partridge with round, flashing eyes.

Partridge was not used to liquor, and the drinks went to his head very quickly. He supposed his loyalty to Dora had been somewhat tarnished during the past week, when she'd done little but complain. And so when Daphne finally shouted, "Come on, honey, let's *frug* it!" he had gotten up to make a ridiculous spectacle of himself. Dexter roared with laughter, as the small girl named Esther sat on his lap.

At last Partridge lost his footing, and, holding to Daphne, pitched to the floor, entangled with her. Daphne began kissing his cheeks wildly. Then Dexter came over and helped Partridge to his feet. He put an arm around Partridge's shoulders, saying, "Good ol' Partridge. How about these girls!"

Just then Partridge looked toward the bar to see something he'd never seen before. Between bottles was a small round hole in the wood. There was a reflection of glass there. Then the hole disappeared.

He knew that if Dexter had not totally defeated him until now, he had finally accomplished it.

Partridge sat at his board in the plant the next day, pressing his hands against his hurting head. He was thinking that he'd managed to remove the lipstick before he'd left Dexter's house. But he'd been unable to do anything about his condition otherwise. Dora had not spoken to him through breakfast. Now, it was ten past five in the afternoon; the large room had emptied of the other engineers and the draftsmen.

Dexter strode out of his office jauntily and punched Partridge in the arm. "Recovered, eh, Partridge?"

"Partially."

"We'll have to do that again one of these nights, right?"

"Well, yes, sir. But I was wondering if you'd mind too much if I didn't get over this evening. I feel rather—"

Dexter slapped his back. "Understand. There's a movie I've been wanting to see. Get a good night's sleep. It'll cure everything."

He watched the man leave the room feeling defeat pouring through him. Then he sat there, replaying those tapes in his mind, in a last stubborn attempt. Finally he repictured the typed notes which he'd translated from signals from

the typewriter platen. "O—N. Change. Remember. 8, 42, 11, 31." Then he thought: Operation Nerve.

He looked forward at the heavy door of the vault, beside which was a janitor's canvas cart mounted on small wheels. Who, he wondered, knew the combination of that vault? Nobody, he was certain, but Laurence Dexter, who had, as always, opened it this afternoon for the bank delivery of the payroll currency for use the next morning.

A uniformed plant guard walked into the room and smiled. "Little overtime, Mr. Partridge?"

"Afraid so," Partridge said.

"No rest for the wicked, eh?" he said.

"That's it," Partridge replied. He waited until the man had moved out of sight into the shop. Having worked enough overtime on other occasions, he knew the guard's schedule: he would now go through the shop to the loading dock, then check the supply department.

Partridge got up and walked to the vault. Feeling his hand trembling, he turned the combination wheel on the door. 8, 42, 11, 31. He was shaking all over now. He turned the handle. The door opened. He took a long breath and stepped inside.

Early the next morning he stood in Laurence Dexter's office. Dexter, staring at him in disbelief, said, "What kind of fool do you think I am?"

"I want the patent for my fuse transferred to my name. Now. Call your lawyer."

Dexter leaned back in his chair. "Partridge, you are the most naive imbecile it's been my experience to observe. Let's put the cards on the table, shall we? Foolish as you are, you bugged every part of my house, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I thought in the beginning, when I found them, that it was one of my competitors. It's tried frequently, you know. I'm always on the watch for it. So I let it go on, to find out who'd done it. Then, two nights ago, I found that the platen on my typewriter was rigged. Never saw a thing like that before. Knew then that it had to be you. Well, I knew you were up to something all along. Trying to discover a bit of a blackmail wedge, eh?

"But you didn't. What you did do, despite the fact that you're an idiot, was come up with something —that platen. You may as well know that I intend to patent that in my name too. Should find a fair market for it." Dexter smiled. "What did you gain by the effort, Partridge?"

"Quite enough."

Dexter slapped his palms against his desk, smile disappearing. "What in God's name do you think I threw that party for, night before last? Don't you know that I had

Horace on the other side of the bar with a movie camera?"

"I know."

"Then don't you realize what I can do with that film? Your wife—"

"You no longer have that film."

"What are you talking about? Horace—"

"Horace is gone."

Dexter stared at him, face reddening. "He's what?"

"I found your mistake, Dexter. But I didn't realize it until last night. It was the combination for the vault, which I got from the signals of the platen. You've been holding those accounting books that Horace attempted to fix in there for years. Last night I let myself in and took them. I drove out to your house while you were at that movie. I gave the accounting books to Horace in exchange for the film. He was delighted. You've lost your hold on him."

Dexter's face tensed in fury. "That doesn't mean—"

"I also took the payroll money. Every bill of it. Something in the neighborhood of a half million dollars. You ought to think about tightening your security here, Dexter. I stacked the currency in a janitor's cart and rolled it straight out of here."

"By God, I'll—"

"I'm not a thief. And I have no intention of keeping the money. But if you don't call your lawyer and tell him to get over here and guarantee my ownership of the patent on that fuse, I will then call the police and tell them where I put the money."

"Where do you think this is getting you, Partridge!" Dexter roared.

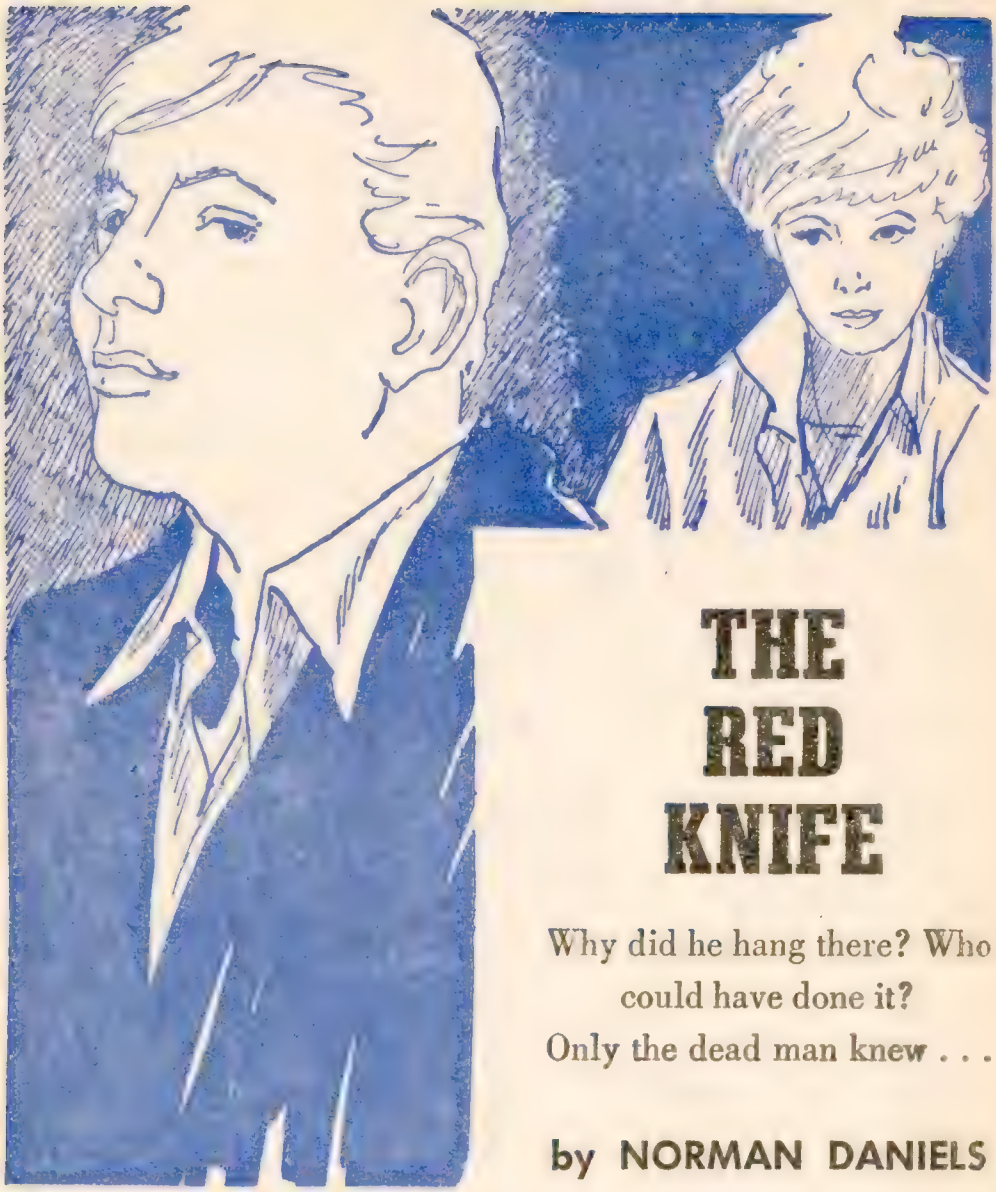
"I'll inform the police that the theft was planned between us. You're spread a bit thin in production, you know. You could use that kind of capital. You're the only one who is supposed to know the combination of the vault. And the film—do you recall putting your arm around my shoulders? Great friends. Getting drunk together. Celebrating. Girls. Logical conspirators to arrange to rob that vault.

"Incidentally there's a very nice shot of your living-room calendar, to prove that the film was taken the night before the theft. Make up your mind, please. All I want is what is rightfully mine."

He watched the man tremble with rage. Finally Dexter lifted his telephone and said in a tight, bitter voice, "Tell my lawyer to get over here, Miss Glass."

NEXT MONTH: A TRULY BRILLIANT NEW SHORT NOVEL

INSIDE THE HIDDEN MAN **By JAMES McKIMMEY**



THE RED KNIFE

Why did he hang there? Who could have done it? Only the dead man knew . . .

by NORMAN DANIELS

I WAS AFRAID of him and I couldn't show it. He was only sixteen, but he had the body of a man—a huge man and the mind of a child. Mrs. Em Vandergelt, who was his mother, treated Myron as any mother would have greated any normal child.

My fear of him lay in the fact that I believed he had committed a murder and that he was easily capable of another. When he got into

the state trooper's car and sat beside me, I had a strong urge to move as far away as possible, which would have shocked the boy's mother.

I never quite got over the respect with which these people of the town treated me. I was just a Normal School graduate, teaching two grades in the three room schoolhouse serving this valley of the Catskills, where the Dutch names and many of the customs remain.

I resented all this politeness at first because I thought they were being haughtily aloof, then I was sure they laughed behind my back and it was all a big joke.

After three months, I knew it was neither of these things. I was a school teacher and, therefore, important. To be given all due respect in that stern, unbending, solemn way of theirs which I now knew was only a thin veneer over warm hearts and an inborn kindliness that comes through when you are one of them.

A girl of twenty-two is more used to being whistled at. I think she likes it better too—I know I do. But there was no whistling here in these thunderous mountains.

Even the state trooper, whose name was Blanchard, and who certainly was not a Catskill Dutchman, seemed to have molded himself into the unhumorous, severe manner of these people.

As Mrs. Vandergelt, Myron and I settled into the back seat of the car, Trooper Blanchard got behind the wheel and leaned over to open the door for the sheriff's deputy. He was Dutch, Catskill born, a sturdy white-haired man named Milton Kruger, who was wise enough to call the police when he encountered a problem he was unable to cope with.

Nobody talked during the ride. Come to think of it, nobody talked much up here anyway. Myron sat beside me, staring straight ahead, chewing a large wad of gum steadily, monotonously and with little clickings of his teeth. Now and then I could almost feel his eyes slide sideways to look at me. He was always doing that. Even before the murder, he frightened me.

Ever since I first met him, I seemed to associate him with these half-wits who appeared peaceable and quiet, but were boiling inside with a rage to do someone harm. Now I was sure he had and I thought Trooper Blanchard believed so too.

Suddenly Mrs. Vandergelt spoke. "Poor, poor Mrs. Oppendyke. Poor, poor Adeline."

"Poor, poor Frank Opendyke, you mean," Deputy Kruger said, without turning around. "He's the one got hung."

"He was turning slow," Myron said. "Just hanging here and turning real slow, like there was a small breeze. You know, like a dummy turns. The kind we usta hang at the

football games representing the other team. You know."

Trooper Blanchard said, "Well, it's a heck of an experience for a kid like you, Myron, but you showed a lot of class. You didn't touch a thing."

"You bet I didn't. I read magazines and I look at TV all right. Don't touch nothin'. That's the way you gotta do."

"Hush, Myron," Em Vandergelt said. "You talk too much."

The boy sat back and the springs squeaked and I was jounced about some. Myron was sulking. A big bruiser like that sitting there and sulking. I wondered what went on in that mind of his. I could almost see the wheels whirring.

This all came about when Myron was on his way home from school and he'd stopped in at Oppendyke's place to apologize for causing trouble the day before. I didn't blame Myron much for what happened, if it was true, because Frank Oppendyke was noted for his bad temper and his violent ways.

It had been an argument about Myron being paid for six hours work on Saturday and Oppendyke claiming he'd only worked four, another little bad habit of Frank's. They'd pushed one another back and forth a bit, but neither came out of it marked. Their language had been stronger than their violence.

Anyway, Myron had stopped off and Mrs. Oppendyke told him Frank was in the barn. Myron had gone there and found Frank hanging from one of the rafters, his heels at least three feet off the floor—and nothing near him that could have been used to step off.

It was plainly a murder. By the way the constable and the trooper had questioned Myron, it was clear they knew about the argument. Even Em was badly worried.

I was frozen to the bone when we reached the farm and we all went into the house where Mrs. Oppendyke—Adeline—was waiting for us. She was a small woman, not more than five feet one, a real wispy creature. I doubted she weighed more than ninety pounds.

She sat in an old rocking chair near the stove, pleating her apron between her work-reddened fingers. Her hair was mousey and grey. She looked like a woman all worn out, and now this—the murder of her husband.

"Have to bring the chairs from the parlor," she said tonelessly. "Too cold to sit in there."

"That's all right, Adeline," Kruger said. "This is Trooper Blanchard. Got some questions to ask. Feel up to it?"

"I might's well answer 'em now as later. You go right ahead."

"Myron here, came by after school," Blanchard said, and I could see the way the wind was blowing. "Is that true?"

"Around three. Always start making supper around three. I was

mixing the meat loaf when he came in and wanted to see Frank."

"Would you say between three and quarter past?"

"Be close," Adeline said. "Pretty close."

"They had a fight yesterday. Did you know about that?"

"Wasn't nothing much. Frank was always fighting. He forgets that boys grow up and get smart and know they don't have to take his kind of abuse any more. My own Ollie struck him a sound blow some time back and lifted Frank clear off his heels."

"Your son?" Blanchard asked, looking around as if the boy ought to be there.

"Two kids," Kruger said. "Boy about sixteen, girl about fifteen. Live with their grandparents—Adeline's folks. That right?"

"Schooling's better over at Napanock." Adeline Oppendyke looked up suddenly, remembering I was present. "No reflection on you, Miss. It's high school I'm talking about. Too many toughies here. Ask Myron."

"City people." Myron looked as if he wanted to spit. "They stink."

I wondered why a man like the dead Mr. Oppendyke would ever let a sixteen-year-old son leave home when he was needed. Myron had to be hired to help with the farm work. I guessed the absence of the children was Adeline's idea.

"Well," the trooper said, "let's go out to the barn for a look. You don't have to come, Mrs. Oppendyke."

"Thank you," Adeline said.

I noticed the trooper hung back and let the others go on first so he could walk with me. I didn't mind that because he was a tall, blue-eyed man with a quiet voice and nice manners. I liked him at once and I liked the way he held my elbow and helped me over the thin snow and the ice. He looked very manly and handsome in the uniform and the Stetson hat.

"Think the boy killed him?" he asked me. I felt a pang of disappointment because I thought he'd waited for me because he liked me.

"Oh," I said, "I've no idea."

"You board with the Vandergelts and you see a lot of the boy. Just thought I'd ask."

"I—just don't know."

"He's had his share of scrapes. Well, one thing we're sure of. Frank's wife didn't hang him."

"Oh, my goodness," I said. "What an idea!"

"Not so bad an idea," he smiled. "You'd be surprised how many wives like to collect a little early insurance money. Oppendyke wasn't insured, however, except for a lodge policy that'll just about bury him."

"You know that already?"

"First thing I checked. I wouldn't have, though, if I saw Mrs. Oppendyke first. Whoever killed Frank lifted a hundred and ninety pounds. Just hoisted him up. That woman

back there couldn't lift forty pounds."

We walked into the barn. It was growing dark, so Mr. Kruger lit several hurricane lamps and we had all the light we needed. I hovered around one of the lamps set on a workbench, so I could warm my mittened hands occasionally.

I looked toward the middle of the great barn and shivered, though not from the cold. The length of rope still hung down. It had been thrown up over the rafter; then, I suppose, tied around Frank Oppendyke's neck and after he was hoisted up, the rope was tied fast to a post.

The trooper and Mr. Kruger were doing a lot of measuring. Myron tagged along with them, watching and listening to everything. He finally made himself comfortable on a barrel and I was sure he watched me more than anyone else.

Em Vandergelt walked slowly toward me. I clapped my mittens over the meagre heat from the lamp and when I glanced down at the workbench, I noticed a large pocketknife with mottled red sides that looked exactly like the back of a ladybug.

The big blade was open and some strands of hemp clung to it. The tied end of the rope was close by where I stood and I looked at the rope and judged this knife had been used to cut off a section. The knife was, then, left by the murderer after he'd used it to cut the right length of rope.

"Did Myron cut the poor man down?" I asked Em.

"Why, no. He just felt of him. Knew he couldn't do anything for him. Milt Kruger's the one who cut him down."

"Oh," I said. "I was just wondering."

"Frank Oppendyke's gone and I don't speak harshly of the dead, but them kids of his left because they couldn't stand him. I was glad when they did. They're both real nice kids. A joy to Adeline. About the only one she's had, I guess. All she's got now, for sure."

"They do suspect Myron," I said. It was a kindness to let her know this, in the event the boy was arrested.

"Wasn't Myron," she said. "He hollers loud and he fights often, but there's no harm in him. I ain't worried, Miss Prescott."

"Why don't you call me Joan?" I protested. This wasn't the first time I'd asked her. "After all, I live in your house."

"Well, it just don't seem natural

to call a school teacher by her first name. Now don't go worrying about Myron. Guess I know my own boy."

I thought of all the teen-age killers whose mothers must have said the same thing over and over. Myron was moving about now, as calmly as if nothing had happened here and the grim rope above his head was a reminder of nothing evil. Em drifted away from me, walking over to glance at the rope just as I had. I wondered why, and suddenly remembered the strands of hemp adhering to the red knife. I looked for it. The knife was gone. I could feel my heart begin pounding.

She was a mother, covering up her son's guilt. It was my duty to expose her to Trooper Blanchard before she had a chance to hide or destroy the knife. I could see how the whole thing happened. Myron had, perhaps, tried to apologize and there'd been another fight.

Possibly he'd hit Mr. Oppendyke hard enough to stun him and yet not leave any mark on him. Then Myron had used his pocketknife to cut a length of rope off a large spool of it fastened to the further wall. He'd pulled his victim up, tied the rope and run away, forgetting his knife. I knew it was Myron's knife because I'd seen him using it several times.

I stood there, not feeling the cold any more, and wondered what on earth I should do. I must have showed my agitation because Trooper Blanchard came over to me.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"No. I'm just cold."

"First year in the Catskills? Winter's no friend of ours up here, Miss Prescott. Takes rugged people to endure. We're rugged."

"You're from the Catskills too?" I asked. It might have been a silly question at a murder investigation, but I liked to hear him speak.

"My mother's name was Van Klee. I was raised up around Ellenville."

"No wonder the people here trust you so much."

"Takes a Dutchman to understand a Dutchman," he said with a broad smile.

"What about this murder?"

"We walk slowly," he said. "No need to rush. A man's dead. We'll find out what happened some day."

"But do you suspect Myron?"

"I wouldn't say that. Not at this time. Lots of evidence to be gathered first. Autopsy report, for one thing."

"Yes," I said. "I understand."

He looked at me with a sharpness I could almost feel. No one was deceiving this man for long. I was holding a great secret and he sensed it somehow, but he was gentleman enough not to pry further then. All of a sudden, I wanted to get out of there.

It was like being in the presence

of the violently dead and we shared a secret. I rushed out of the barn and ran back to the house.

Mrs. Oppendyke was still rocking slowly, still kneading at her apron. I said, "They haven't learned very much."

"What's there to learn? Man's dead, that's all there is to it. Man's dead, nothing else. Retribution is a word I don't like. Not permitted to be said in this house. They think Myron killed him. I don't. We're not murderers here."

"But who then?" I asked.

"Tramps. Even in winter they come, and Frank hated them. Find one in the barn, he'd beat him. There've been several in the past and he beat 'em. It's possible he tried to beat another who was stronger."

Of course her theory was good, but not to me, because I'd seen the red knife. I knew Myron was guilty and that his mother was guilty as well, of stealing and withholding evidence.

I wanted to tell Blanchard, partly because my civic conscience told me I must, and partly because I liked him and I would have enjoyed helping him. It would not hurt his record to have brought in a murderer with all the necessary evidence.

Yet I couldn't bring myself to do this. Of course, I realized I could hardly remain a boarder in Em's home, and then I found myself defending her actions by telling myself if I left, it would not be right away. Trooper Blanchard was extremely astute and he'd wonder why, and if he questioned me too much, I knew I'd tell. Perhaps I would anyway.

Adeline kept up her rocking. "My children can come home now. That was a lie I told, about the school being better over at Napanock. School here's just fine."

"But why, then—?" I could have bitten off my tongue.

She raised her head and she was the weariest looking woman I had ever seen. In her deep, ringed eyes, was all the woe in the world. Except that it was an impossible physical feat for a woman so puny, I'd have believed she'd actually killed her own husband.

"Frank was a hard man. A saving man. There's a great deal of money in the bank and this farm's clear, but at what price? What price? He worked himself as no man should work. It made him short-tempered and hot of tongue and manner. I am sorry he'd dead, for he was my husband, but he drove my children from me and he gave me no peace."

I didn't know what to say. Having the poor woman unburden herself to me, a complete stranger, was embarrassing, though I could see she felt better with the whole story off her mind.

The others trooped in then and turned their bottoms toward the stove for warmth. Em set about

putting on a pot of coffee without so much as a leave from Adeline.

"I'll send Myron over with supper," she said to Adeline, just as if nothing had happened and nobody was there. "Made some pot cheese—been settin' long enough to be real good by now. Go fine with your gooseberry jam. Land o' Goshen, seems a long time since I had any of that. Never could get them berries sweet enough myself."

"Cellar's full," Adeline said. "Now Frank's gone, there's too much. The children don't care for it. I'd be obliged if you'd set out some cookies from that new box."

"Please don't bother," Blanchard said.

"You're here to help me, ain't you?" Adeline asked. "No more'n right I give you a warm drink and something sweet. All men like sweets."

Em found the tightly sealed box of assorted cookies and pried at the colorful wrapping with her thumb. She carried the box over to where Myron stood warming himself.

"You carry that red knife, Myron?"

"Sure, Ma," he said. He dug into his pocket. I was prepared to understand the look of anguish that would spread over his wide face when he found the knife was gone. But he took it out and opened the blade and slit the seal.

Em put the cookies on the plate, leaving the knife on the kitchen table. The coffee perked, she got out the cups and saucers and finally she pulled the coffee pot to the back of the stove to settle. That was when she picked up the knife and closed the blade.

"I remember when your Ollie and my Myron bought these knives in Kingston, Ad. How long ago? Five, six years? Never saw two boys so set on one knife. Lucky the store had two. Remember?"

"I remember," she said. "Ollie's is around somewhere. Cut himself with it one day and Frank took it away from him. Frank set some store by that knife too."

I bit into a cookie to keep from crying out. I drank the coffee too hot and scalded my throat and stuffed more cookies into my mouth. After awhile, Trooper Blanchard got restless and went out to where his car was parked. I heard him talking on his radiophone.

Then he came in and said we'd better be on our way.

Em touched Adeline gently on the shoulder. "Tonight I'll come over and stay. Guess the school teacher ain't afraid to be in the house with just Myron there."

"Oh no," I said quickly. "I won't be afraid."

"Knew you wouldn't be," she said, in that double talk between women with secrets that I was beginning to understand quite well. I thanked Mrs. Oppendyke, consoled her in my own poor way and

then I went out to the car and Myron squeezed in beside me.

At eight that night, Myron and I were alone. I stayed in my room until the tension became too much to bear. I could hear Myron bumbling about in the kitchen and I thought that if he was coming for me, I'd better be ready.

That talk about there being two red knives hadn't been reassuring to me. I thought it might be a plot between the two women to cover up for Myron, even though it was Adeline's husband who got killed. These people were loyal to one another under all circumstances. Possibly the same loyalty would hold between the wife of the victim and the mother of the murderer.

When I walked into the kitchen, Myron was setting out two cups and saucers and I saw that he'd also put out a batch of rolls his mother had made for dinner.

"I was going to ask you to come out and have coffee," Myron said. "Ma told me I should."

"Thank you, Myron," I said, wondering when he'd take out that red knife. I was grimly certain that he knew I'd guessed he was the killer and that all that talk about two red knifes was only for the purpose of covering up for his benefit.

"I guess you don't like me much," he said. "I'm kinda slow and you're very smart, so I guess I don't amount to much in your eyes."

"What a thing to say, Myron!"

"Just the same, I guess it's true."

"Lots of people who are slow are very smart," I countered, feeling that I was humoring a boyman, to whom being humored would have no meaning.

"That so?" he asked with a spark of interest.

At least I'd erased some of that animosity. For the time being I might be able to hold him in check. Perhaps Trooper Blanchard would come. I was silently praying someone would.

"You need some extra help," I went on. "I could tutor you, Myron."

"Would you?" he asked quickly. I'd had no idea he was so willing to learn, but at the same time I had that hopeless feeling that it was all no use.

"Being a little slow don't mean I'm dumb," he said.

"I never believed you were dumb, as you put it."

"Maybe some things I understand better'n you, ma'am. Things like maybe I'm more used to. Like people. Like people here in the Catskills. I know them all right."

"I'm sure you do," I said, and I was getting apprehensive as to what this was leading to.

"You think you understand us, ma'am?"

"I'm trying to," I said. "I'll get to know all of you, I'm sure. I want to."

He reached into his pocket and I set my coffee cup down with a

rattle that made him grin. Looking at him now, I thought I saw a keen enough mind behind those bland eyes. He was just a big lout of a man physically, though perhaps mentally I'd underestimated him.

But the knife was coming out now. He placed it on the kitchen table and left it there while he heaped as much jam on one of the biscuits as it would hold. He took a bite of it, had some coffee.

"Like ma said, ma'am, there were two knives. Frank took the other one away from Ollie. But nobody took mine away."

"I can see that," I said.

"You don't think there were two red knives, you go ask Frank's wife."

"She already told me, Myron."

He opened the big blade of the knife and looked at it keenly. "Yes, she did, but I don't think you believed her."

I was scarcely breathing and yet, as I sat there studying this outlandish boy with his knife, I couldn't see any murder or violence written on his face or pictured in his eyes.

Suddenly I felt at peace with him and I was no longer afraid in his presence and I would have sworn he was incapable of murder. I felt as if I'd just come to know him.

I said, "Myron, it doesn't make any difference what I was thinking about you. None of it is true. I can see that now. I do believe there are two red knives and if I had any ideas that you may have killed Frank, I haven't now."

"I'm glad," he said. "I like you. Everybody does, but we got this feeling maybe you don't like us."

"Now you're wrong. Just as seriously wrong as I've been, Myron. I intend to tutor you. I'm going to see that you catch up on your studies, even go ahead of the others because you're capable of it if you try hard."

He was grinning in his vast appreciation when someone knocked and then came right on in. It was Trooper Blanchard. A few moments before I'd have been glad to see him and, while I was still happy he had come, it was not for the same reason.

"Miss Prescott," he said, "I'd be obliged if you'd come out to my car. Got something to tell you."

"I'll go out," Myron offered quickly.

"No, you stay here," Blanchard said.

Obediently I followed Blanchard and got into his police car. The heater was on so it was warm. Blanchard regarded me with what I thought was some amusement.

"Myron's not so bad, you know," he said.

"I already know that," I replied with some sharpness. "I admit I was afraid of him. I also admit I thought he'd killed Frank, but now I don't. If you brought me out here to tell me you're going to

arrest him, I think you're making a very bad mistake."

"Now that's fine, Miss Prescott. We were all a bit worried about you, but I guess you are getting to understand us after all."

"If knowing these people are all good people, then I understand them all right. However, I don't know what you're driving at."

"We're not going to arrest anybody for the death of Frank. He killed himself, you know."

I must have jumped because his hand reached down and grasped mine tightly. I could feel the strength of it clear through my mitten.

"But—how could he? The rope was too short. It was impossible for him to have pulled himself up."

"I thought you knew," he said. "Otherwise, I'd have been less direct. They did an autopsy on him and two things were very evident. He was dead some time before Myron even got out of school, so the boy was eliminated. The other fact was that Frank Oppendyke only had a short time to live and he couldn't take it."

"I still can't see how—" I began.

Somehow, his arm got around my shoulders and I let myself be drawn closer to him. Well, it was a cold day, even here in the car.

"His wife," he said. "She found him first and there was a barrel under his feet, tipped over. He set up the gallows, stepped on the barrel—I even saw the marks of his heels on the bottom of the barrel. His wife moved it away so it wouldn't look as if he had killed himself. She would rather folks thought he was killed. No dishonor in that."

I nodded slowly. "For her children's sake. What are you going to do?"

"File a report," he said. "Ask them to keep it secret. Let folks think Frank was murdered by some tramp. Nobody has to tell them. That's what they'll assume."

"Why do you do this?" I asked him and turned my face toward his and I felt my cheeks warm slightly, his gaze was that direct and full of meaning.

"We stand by our own up here, Joan. I don't think that's so hard for you to understand, is it?"

"No. No, it's not hard for me. Not now."

"I didn't think so, the way you kept silent about the red knife you thought was Myron's. It was Frank's. He'd used it to cut the rope."

I know I actually blushed. "So you saw Em pick it up."

"Sure. She knows darn well I did. So does everybody else, but there's no sense in talking about it. Looks to me like you're one of us now."

"Oh, I don't know—" I said lamely.

"You didn't speak either, but you certainly worried. My next day off is Tuesday. I have a small car. I'd be delighted to take you over the Storm King, if you like."

"I'd be delighted," I said, and I meant it. After all, I did belong.

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Leo Margulies, Publisher

the FOOTPRINT on the PIANO

"I wouldn't want to live without you," she had told him. He nodded. She had asked for it . . .

by FRED MUNSON

GARTH TURNED to his wife. "Damn it, Martha! That maid's been in our apartment mixing things all up again."

Garth, honey, she's only doing her job."

"One of these days. I'm going to have that lock changed. God knows how many people have keys to it. That fat, ugly, old maid in every day; and yesterday, that dried up little nitwit of a superintendent was snooping around here again."

"Garth, honey, you shouldn't say things like that. Mrs. Johnson is a very sweet woman. All of us in the apartment building consider her more of a friend than a maid. And little old Mr. Minney is not a nitwit. He's just a little forgetful. He came about your complaints that the oven pilot wouldn't stay on. He forgot that he had checked it last week."

"How come they always sneak in here when we're out? They never come when we're here."

"They're afraid you might be composing, darling. They don't want to disturb you."

"As soon as I get around to it, I'm changing the lock on that door so nobody gets in here unless I let them in. Where's my music?"

"In the piano bench, darling. Mrs. Johnson put it there so she could dust your piano."

Garth took a few sheets of manuscript music frm the bench, letting the lid fall back with a slam. "I need a music room where I can have a concert grand instead of this upright shoved against the wall. Why do we have to live in this smelly old apartment building full of smelly old people?"

"It's been my home for twenty-nine years and—and our home for six months. Oh, Garth! Am I one of the smelly old people?"

Garth could hear the choke in her voice; and without turning around, he knew her eyes were welling up with tears. He banged a few chords on the piano. There was no sense in being mean to her any more.

Six months ago, he thought he had been smart—real smart. In fact he had thought it was the smartest thing he had ever done in his whole thirty-one years marrying Martha Skillingstead.

Dolly had warned him that he would be sorry. In fact that was the last thing Dolly had ever said.

And sorry he was. Real sorry. Sorry that all the income Martha had was from the leases on this old Skillingstead apartment building. How did he know she wasn't loaded with cash? She spent quite a bit of money on him the few times they had gone out before they were married. And she had always dressed very well. Pretty good figure, too, for a woman fifty-three.

Yes. He could have been happy with her if she only had more money. Of if she wouldn't be so stubborn about selling this old building.

He had to have money. Money to put on a concert in Town Hall and then finance an extended concert tour. People had to hear his

music. No more playing in cheap little smoky night spots for him.

Too bad. She had a certain air about her that would have helped him with the old dowagers you have to put up with to make it in the concert field. He would have liked to have been able to go on with her. He was really sorry he had to do what he had to do.

He quietly closed the piano keys and stood up. He turned slowly toward her. He had to give her one last chance.

"Martha, I'm begging you. Won't you reconsider about selling this old building?"

Her eyes were still moist, but her voice was steady. "I love you, Garth. You're the only man that's ever been in my life. I'll do anything in my power to make you happy. Anything but that. This building is our security, our future. You don't have to work in night clubs anymore. You have time to really practice and write. You'll see. Keeping the building is what will make you a success."

"Okay! We don't have to go into all of that again." He turned away.

"Don't be angry, darling." She came up behind him and put her arms around him.

He rather liked the way she fawned on him all the time. He was going to miss her.

He pulled roughly away. "I'm going out."

She let her arms fall limply to her sides. "Garth?"

"What?"

"You will come back, won't you? I wouldn't want to live without you, darling."

There! She had said it herself. She didn't want to live without him. And he couldn't live with her. Not like this. What he had to do was best for everybody.

"I'll be back. I—I have to see my agent. I'll probably be gone all day."

"All right, dear." She kissed him on the cheek and closed the door after him.

See his agent. That was a laugh. He had no more use for that guy than he had for a hole in the head. What he needed was to go down to Tully's Bar and have a couple of belts so he could think.

Think? What's there to think about? You got to make your own breaks if you're going to get anywhere. Besides, he had already thought it all out. It was the pilot going out in the oven a couple of times that had given him the idea.

As Garth walked into Tulley's Bar, Tully himself was seated behind the piano-bar, noodling. Tully was only playing with his right hand, of course. He had his left hand tucked in his coat pocket.

Speaking of breaks. Tully's smashed left hand was supposed to have been only a lucky break for Garth, but it turned out good for Tully, too. Tully had been drunk and had thought he himself had slammed the car door on his own

hand. He had thought he had been pretty lucky that Garth and Dolly had been there to rush him to the hospital.

Tully had been playing in one of the biggest spots in town at the time. Being Tully's best friend, Garth, of course, had stepped right in and taken over Tully's job and had held it several months until he had married Martha.

But Tully really lucked out. Everybody felt sorry for him; especially after he tried to kill himself when he found out he'd never be able to play the piano with his left hand again. That's how he got his own bar. Pretty lucky to have your own bar.

Tully jumped up and clasped Garth around the shoulders. "Hi, old buddy. Glad to see you in today. Come on over and have your usual drinks on the house. Hey, everybody. I want you to meet the man who saved my life. If he hadn't of been there when I had my accident, I might of bled to death."

"It was nothing, Tully. Anybody would have done the same thing."

"That's what you say, old buddy; but just the same, your money's never any good in Tully's Bar."

Garth drank a few drinks with Tully, then decided to leave. He didn't like to be around Tully too much. It depressed him to be around a cripple.

He left the bar and walked slowly down the street, wondering what to do with himself.

What he really wished he could do was spend the day in Dolly's apartment. But there wasn't any Dolly anymore.

Why couldn't she have seen things his way? Beautiful young Dolly. A good singer, too. His marrying Martha didn't have to change things between him and Dolly.

Dolly just couldn't see it that way. She was going to tell Martha everything. She even threatened to tell the police about him slamming the car door on Tully's hand. He had to do something to stop her. Besides, with the stuff she was on, it would have only been a question of time before she would have taken an overdose herself.

He really missed Dolly.

He wandered into a movie house and sat down. He was going to miss Martha, too. He had become rather used to her in six months. Ah, well, you have to make your own breaks.

The movies were both old, but they were both good ones. One of them had Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman in it, and the way it ended kind of tore you up.

But he couldn't get too interested in the movies. His mind kept wandering to the apartment house. He wished he knew how much he could get for it. He almost wished he had had it appraised, but that might have been dangerous.

Anyway, he was sure it would be enough. He was also sure it would certainly be the natural thing to do to sell the building and move to New York right away after the accident. Anybody would want to get as far away as possible after losing his wife.

He decided to go to a cafeteria and get something to eat, then take in a couple of more movies. He didn't want to get home before ten. That was Martha's bedtime; and as long as he had made up his mind to do it, he didn't want to spend anymore time than necessary with her.

It had been a lot easier with Dolly. The idea had come to him in a flash while he was with her. Just a spur of the moment thing, and it was all over.

This thinking about something too long is not good for you. A man could get ulcers that way.

A few hours later, he was in the hall outside his apartment door. Martha certainly had sensitive hearing. She must have heard him rattle his keys. Before he could get his key in the lock, she had the door open.

"You came back!" She had been crying.

"I told you I was coming back." He never could get used to how all worked up women always got just because you went away for a few hours.

She threw herself into his arms. "Oh, darling, I was so worried. If

anything should happen to our love, I just wouldn't want to live."

There! She said it again.

He patted her shoulder. "You'll never have to worry any more."

He felt sort of like a humanitarian. She was too nice a person to have to worry whether he was coming home or not.

"Oh, Garth! I'm so happy. Can I fix you a drink or something."

"Just make me a short one. I'm tired and want to go right to bed."

"I am, too, darling. And now that you're home, I can sleep."

In less than an hour Martha was contentedly sound asleep.

Garth carefully removed her arms from around his neck. He waited. She was still asleep. He didn't need to turn on a light. Martha always left a dim one on in the apartment. He slowly got out of bed and went over to the piano.

What a way to live! Piano, wall bed, everything in one big room. Even the stove and refrigerator were only separated from everything else by a low sandwich bar.

He moved the piano about two

feet to the left so one end of it was just barely under the small ventilator that was up near the high ceiling.

He lifted the lid of his piano. The eighteen inch piece of garden hose he had put down in there was still there. He took it out and closed the lid of the piano and put the piece of garden hose on top of the piano.

Damn that old Mrs. Johnson! She had forgotten to dust the top of his piano again.

He looked over at Martha. Still asleep.

He went over to the little table by the bed and lifted the receiver on the phone to be sure it was working. Then he went to the stove.

As he had expected, Martha had the oven going full blast. The old steam radiator just didn't put out enough heat on these cold nights.

He turned off the oven and blew out the pilot. He checked the pilot on the two top burners. It was never on, but he had to be sure. He turned the oven back on and waited until the smell of gas was pretty strong. It didn't take long.

He walked over and moved his piano bench two feet so it was in proper position to play the piano. He picked up the piece of garden hose, stepped up on the bench and then stepped up on the top of the piano, not making a sound in his bare feet. He inserted one end of the hose into the ventilator and put the other end in his mouth, pinching his nose shut with his thumb and finger.

It was a little uncomfortable to breathe that way, but it wouldn't be for long.

Martha became a little restless. He hoped she didn't wake up. She was usually a very sound sleeper.

Martha settled down again. Her breathing became steady again. It seemed to be a little more shallow. Suddenly, she was still.

He looked at his watch. She was probably already gone, but he would wait a full thirty minutes longer to be certain.

He looked at his watch several times.

Finally the half hour passed. He got down off the piano and checked her pulse. She wouldn't worry any more.

He dialed the old apartment superintendent. If old Mr. Minny didn't answer right away he would dial the maid, Mrs. Johnson. Either one of them would do. He didn't want to be breathing this gas too long.

A quavering old voice came on the phone. "Eh? What is it? What is it?"

"Help us! You have to help us. This is Garth Winters. I just woke up. The apartment is full of gas. I'm too weak to get out of bed. Help us. Help us." Garth let his voice trail off.

"Hold on, son! Hold on! I'll be right there."

Garth let the phone fall on the floor; then he got back up on the piano and put the hose back in his mouth.

In a few minutes, he heard both Mr. Minney and Mrs. Johnson talking excitedly as they came down the hall.

He got down off the piano, lifted the piano lid and put the piece of garden hose inside. He quickly went over and got in bed with Martha.

Perfect. Everything had worked perfect.

Oh my God! The dust on the piano! He had to wipe off his footprints before they opened the door.

He ran into the bathroom, grabbed a towel and ran to the piano.

He heard a key in the lock!

Then he heard Mr. Minney's voice. "I guess I used the wrong key."

Garth swiped the dust off the top of the piano, ran back to the bathroom, got rid of the towel; then ran to the bed and got in. He was breathing very hard.

"All right you old fool," he said under his breath. "You can come in now."

Mr. Minney was speaking again. "I must've brung the wrong keys. None of these work."

"Here. Let me open it." It was Mrs. Johnson's voice.

Garth could feel himself going under. Hurry up, you clumsy fools.

"I don't know what it is, Mr. Minney. None of my keys work either."

Sudden terror hit Garth. He didn't want to die. Never mind if everybody knew he had killed Martha. He had to get back up on the piano.

All he wanted to do from now on was stay alive.

Never mind the money. Never mind anything. He had to get back up on the piano.

He tried to sit up. He couldn't make it. He rolled out onto the floor with a thud. He started crawling toward the piano. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to die!

Just before he lost consciousness, he heard Mr. Minney's voice. "Oh my God, Mrs. Johnson! I just remembered. Miss Skillingstead said nobody was to come in their apartment any more unless her husband let them in. She had the lock changed today!"

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every month

She reached in her purse, touched the evil, cold thing that waited there. She was a girl and alone. But the gun would even up things.

FINAL SALE

by ESTELLE CHESSID

•

IT WAS A shabby little general store, tucked away in the natural dip of a lonely winding road that meandered unevenly through the uppermost tip of the state. It suited the girl's purposes perfectly.

She pulled the long dusty blue sedan towards the snow-piled curb and slid her lithe, graceful body over on to the empty seat beside her. Leaning her head back on the soft gray leather, she watched the smoke from her cigarette in its lazy spiral upwards. It hung there, flattened and trapped against the ceiling until it dispersed into nothing.

A bitter little smile curled her full lips and, without realizing it, she said aloud, "Like me?". The sound of her own voice startled her.

All the unanswerable questions and painful memories of her recent past came rushing back to beat against her consciousness like the smoke on the ceiling. But, unlike the smoke, they did not vanish.

What had brought her to this snow-bound hick town? What had turned her from a carefree, pretty college girl into a hard-bitten, runaway criminal, haggard and old inside—and all within six short months—the space of a single college semester?

The lessons she'd learned this term would be found in no cloistered, ivied halls of learning.

A school dance, a casually accepted date arranged by a girl friend and suddenly—blinding, numbing love, total and consuming. But . . . for whom? And now . . . for what?

"Help me", he had said. "Help me to live and grow and create a life for us both worthy of our love." Beautiful, enflaming words! And she'd heeded them. She'd left school, family and innocence.

She'd married him (at least that) and lived for five months on crumbs, loans and humiliations. His passionate words in her ears, his gentle fingers on her body kept her a willing and pliant slave. Finally, this—

Her hand slipped inside her purse, felt for her wallet, now bulging and heavy—and for the small cold lump of steel lying so cruelly patient alongside it.

Smoothing her long blonde hair with a gloved hand, she shrugged her fur coat closer about her shoulders. The ignition key dropped into her open bag with a slight ring, as it hit the other metal object at the bottom. She snapped the bag shut and swung her long, shapely legs out of the car.

She didn't see the small figure dart away suddenly from behind the store window.

Inside, the place was just what she'd expected—a jumble of food, clothing, toiletries, even some small appliances, the mute but expressive odds and ends of man's domestic need.

Trying to fight the growing anxiety and tension that raked at her throat, she forced herself to amble slowly and casually along the empty aisles. The only other person in the store was a thin, smallish man, half hidden behind the smooth, darkly shining counter.

The garish plaid of his heavy woolen shirt caught her attention.

She stocked up on food staples, extra clothing, blankets and cigarettes. As she brought the items to the long counter, she glanced indifferently at the quietly waiting proprietor.

Her voice sounded light and tinkling in the still, snow-hushed atmosphere.

"There, that's it, thank you. That'll be all for now, I think. Could you wrap it quickly, please?"

"Sure you don't want a raincoat to go with the boots, miss? Got a coupla good ones. Not fancy like the city stores, but good and serviceable." He spoke with the slow pleasant drawl indigenous to this part of the state.

"No, thank you. Thanks very much. Could you please tote up my bill? It's kind of late and I have to be going." As she talked, she kept looking towards the large front window, frowning at the darkening sky.

"Oh, not passin' through? Figurin' on stayin' awhile, eh?"

His sharply spoken question startled her. "No. Well—" She smiled, carefully adding a little shrug to more fully suggest the stammer of confusion. "The weather is really awful. Yes, I may stay a few days longer."

She was immediately sorry she had said that, and turned her back to the man. She hoped he didn't see the flash of annoyance that distorted her even features for a second.

The man was bending intently over the bill. He didn't look up as he went on, "Oh, bet you're stayin' at Ben Crocker's cabins up in the hills. Mighty clean. And fair-priced, too."

She turned back with a quick movement. "Ben— Uh, no. I don't think that's the one. How much, please?"

"Not done figurin' yet, ma'am. Sure are nervous for such a pretty thing. Come from downstate, don't yuh? Right?"

"What? Well, nearby." She gave him a sudden, radiant smile. "How clever of you to notice."

The slender man looked up slowly and his calm gray eyes showed appreciation of her slim, youthful figure. He seemed not at all perturbed by her choice of words.

"Nothin' to it, ma'am. It's those fancy-heeled shoes and that suit. I may not sell that kind of stuff here, but it don't mean I can't tell the real thing when I see it. See, it wouldn't move around here. Too flimsy and too expensive. Pretty rugged country here-abouts. Makes people value good service over good looks. 'Specially when it rains and snows. Looks like it might do both again pretty soon now. Sure you don't want that raincoat?"

A faint crease of irritation appeared for an instant between her finely arched brows, but her voice

was still polite. "No, thank you. Please, I am in a hurry. Could you just add the bill, please." She tried to stop herself from fidgeting by pretending to examine some material lying alongside the counter.

"I can see you're in a hurry. Yessiree. Easy to tell that. Shame, though, pretty thing like you. Young, too."

The girl jerked her head up to see if there was any deeper meaning to his idle remarks. The garrulous old man didn't seem to notice.

"I beg your pardon. What do you mean?" She tried to keep her voice level.

"Oh, nothin' much. Only, you can't be all that strong to go cartin' this pack o' food and stuff around for the fun of it. Must be a darn good reason. I'd say. . . . he probably ain't worth it."

For the first time his long face lit up in a grin. He chuckled, acknowledging her impatience and her restraint of it. But when he looked up to answer, it was with a completely guileless sincerity.

"See what I mean? Good lookin', intelligent, young. Not poor by a durn-site. Big fancy car . . ." He stopped her question in mid-breath with his upraised hand. "I saw through the window. Not many customers out on a day like this so you get to notice a lot about the ones that do come in. 'Specially if they're strangers, and, like I say, nice to look at."

She stared at him quietly for a moment, then made her decision. Her green eyes took on the slight sheen of a predatory animal before the hunt, and her breathing became deeper and very steady.

"You're quite observant, aren't you, sir?" Her voice was soft as she continued, "I guess it gets very lonely out here. In a store. Just you, alone, so much of the time. Or do you have a family in the back?"

He sighed.

"Nope. Just me now. Wife passed away going on five years now. Never had young'uns. Does get mighty lonely. But I keep busy; got a few things to do; the store's only one of them."

"Oh.!" The tenseness seemed to have left her shoulders and her voice was strong and assured, and perfectly controlled.

"Well, perhaps I can look at a raincoat after all, while you add up the bill. It does look like it's getting worse out."

She walked to the coat rack nearest the counter; her bag tightly clasped in her gloved hand. Her thoughts organized themselves like vicious mercenaries, alert and eager with the plan of action confirmed and about to begin.

With her head bent over the coats, her voice sounded muffled but clearly audible. "I'll bet no one was in here all day. It's been so bad outside."

His neat balding head, still bowed over the bill, looked pink and fragile in the reflected light of

the overhead lamps. He barely moved his lips as he spoke. "Yep. That's right. Matter of fact, haven't seen a soul since Deputy Barnes was in here about eleven o'clock night before last."

"Who?" The girl stopped fingering the coats. She stiffened but didn't turn around.

"Deputy Barnes. He just stopped in to tell me about the road blocks and such." His voice betrayed not the slightest hint of anything other than small-town gossip.

She swayed against the racks. "Road blocks." It was not quite the tone she had been trying for.

The busy storekeeper seemed not to have noticed. "Yep. All roads, in and out, have been blocked since yesterday morning. They figure the guy got as far as here about two days ago. Probably wounded. They think he has someone else with him. He's pretty well hemmed in by now, though."

Her earlier anxiety and fear flooded over her in a sickening reality. She forced herself to remain standing and tried unsuccessfully for a casual tone. What came out instead was strained and harsh.

"Oh? Man? Tell me more."

"Not in such a hurry any more now?"

"Please, tell me what it's all about.!"

Again the simple old man seemed to have noticed nothing unusual in her stuttering speech or distressed tone of voice.

"Well, kinda ironical, I guess you'd call it. Seems this bank robber took a mighty big haul nice and smooth, except for having to kill a guard and maybe get a little nick on the arm or somewhere himself. Made a clean getaway. But, seems a friend of his—ex-friend; that is—got a little jittery and just turned himself in to the police. Had some pretty interesting information too."

The girl didn't faint, through sheer will power. Somehow, she managed to squeeze the words out between her gritted teeth. "What information."

The tired-looking elderly man came out from behind the mahogany counter finally. He walked slowly toward the girl. His arm on her shoulder was gentle.

Better sit down, miss. You've got a bit of a wait. They're at the motel now. He'll be taken care of,

and a lot better than you could do it. I don't think you'll want to use that gun now. Thanks. You can cry if you want." He shook his head slightly and added, half to himself, "Can't see why a girl like this would get involved with a hood."

The reference to her lover brought her head up sharply. "Who are you anyway?" There was no glitter of tears, only bitter frustration and pure animal hatred.

He smiled ruefully, "I'm sorry. Forgot my manners. I know your name; kinda thought you'd know mine too." He drew his spare little frame erect; the shirt dazzling in the dimming light, and added: "Matthias Olin, Sheriff of Granger County."

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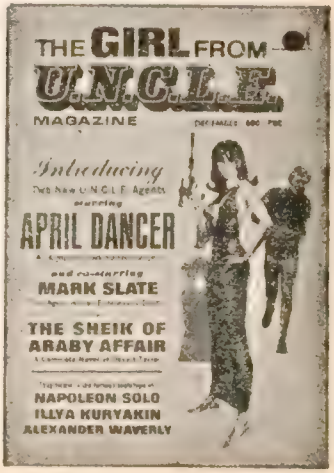


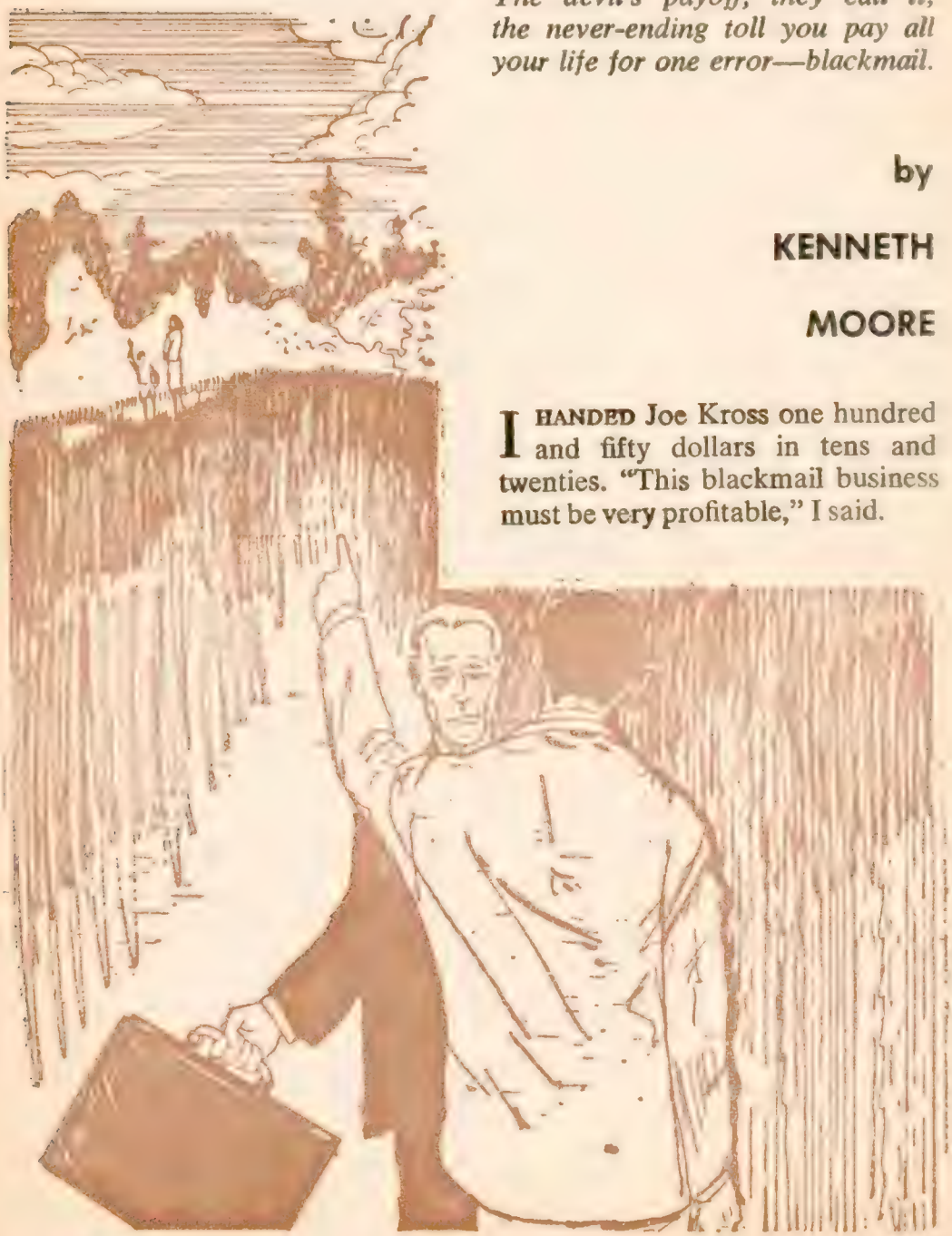
THE TENTH OF EVERY MONTH

The devil's payoff, they call it, the never-ending toll you pay all your life for one error—blackmail.

by

KENNETH

MOORE



I HANDED Joe Kross one hundred and fifty dollars in tens and twenties. "This blackmail business must be very profitable," I said.

"It is, if you know how to work it," Kross admitted.

He dropped my one hundred and fifty dollars into an attache case stuffed with money and gave me a porcelain smile. "Well, that takes care of your payments until the tenth of next month, Mr. Clarke."

I winced. "Please, I've told you never to use that name again. My name is Grayson, Paul Grayson. Not Clarke."

He flashed that irritating porcelain smile again. "Oh yes, I keep forgetting, *Mister* Grayson."

Kross, a tall, thin man in his middle thirties with a face as keen as a well-honed razor, enjoyed a sadistic ability to twist a knife in a wound.

"Too bad a man can't change his past as easily as he can his name," he said. "If that were possible, you wouldn't have to buy my silence every month for one hundred and fifty dollars."

I shuddered and turned up my coat collar against a brisk wind coming off the lake into Pulaski Park.

It was a dull, gray morning of a day that had been robbed of all color, leaving the sky the shade of factory smoke. Although it was early March, during the final push of winter, Kross and I seemed to be the only ones in the park except for a woman playing with a child on a small knoll about sixty yards away. The child's soft laughter was barely audible over the sounds of traffic plowing through the slush of the boulevard a block away.

"I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to pay you the one hundred and fifty dollars next month," I said.

I brushed snow off the seat of a park bench and sat down. "In fact, Kross, I don't intend to pay you another cent of blackmail money."

The porcelain smile didn't lose a bit of its luster.

"I thought we'd been through all this before, Mr. Grayson," he said. "You pay me the one hundred and fifty dollars a month or I tell your employer at Schaffer Electronics that his most trusted bookkeeper is an ex-convict who served time for embezzlement. What do you think he would do after he heard that?"

"He'd probably throw you out of his office," I said. "He wouldn't believe you."

"Oh, he would believe me," Kross assured me. "Especially after I showed him the photostats of your arrest sheets and your prison records."

"I stole that money when I was only twenty-three years old," I said. "That was seventeen years ago."

"The fact that it was seventeen years ago doesn't make any difference," Kross warned. "That's the unfortunate thing about being a convicted embezzler, Mr. Grayson. People have a tendency to be-

lieve once an embezzler, always an embezzler. You're a man not to be trusted with money."

"I paid for my mistake. Seven years in prison."

"Seven years," Kross said, nodding. "Seven years of a ten-year sentence. You are, I might add, a parole violator. I'm sure the authorities in Illinois still carry a fugitive warrant for your arrest for parole violation."

"I can't pay you any more money," I said. "My savings are gone."

"You still have your salary," he said. "Almost eight hundred dollars a month."

"My wife is ill," I said. "The doctors have told me to get her out of this section of the country, take her to a warmer climate. And there is my daughter. I have to provide for her future."

"Really, Mr. Grayson, you never cease to amaze me," he said, chuckling almost soundlessly. "If anyone else gave me that story I wouldn't believe him. However, for some reason, you've always struck me as the type of a man who has a sick wife and a child who has to have someone to provide for her future."

"I've got doctor bills, a mortgage on my home, other expenses," I said. "I can't possibly pay you one hundred and fifty dollars a month out of my salary."

Kross laid a gloved hand on my shoulder in a friendly gesture.

"One hundred and fifty dollars a month isn't too bad," he consoled. "You could have gotten mixed up with one of those vile and greedy blackmailers who would have demanded five thousand dollars or possibly ten thousand dollars in a lump sum to keep from exposing you."

"Maybe that would have been better," I admitted. "I wouldn't have been able to pay it and this business would have been over long ago."

"Oh, it's not as bad as all that, Mr. Grayson," Koss said, spreading a newspaper on the wet bench and sitting down beside me. "You're a good bookkeeper with a monthly salary of approximately eight hundred dollars. Of that, I take one hundred and fifty dollars which leaves you $650 before taxes. That's a comfortable salary."

"The price of a bullet would be more reasonable," I said. "I could kill you."

"Not for one hundred and fifty dollars a month," he said. "If I demanded ten thousand dollars or some other unreasonable lump sum, you might try to kill me. But you're not going to risk anything as foolish as murder just to keep from paying me one hundred and fifty dollars a month."

He leaned back on the bench and put flame to a cigarette. The smoke went straight up in the thin air. "And there is the dossier with the photostats of your arrest sheets and prison records," he added. "It's in the hands of an associate who has orders to send it to the police in the event of my death."

"Maybe I won't kill you," I said. "But one of your other blackmail victims may try it."

Kross gave me that detestable porcelain smile again and shook his head. "They won't kill me because they're in the same boat you're in. I never ask them for more than they can comfortably pay. In this way I can get five hundred dollars a month from an executive with a twenty-five thousand dollars a year income as easily as I get one hundred and fifty dollars a month from you."

He held up a forefinger, like a teacher stressing a point. "That's the secret of my success as a blackmailer, Mr. Grayson. I know exactly which persons to pick as my victims and how much the traffic will bear."

"A nice system," I said.

"And effective," Kross assured me. "By having a regular clientele of small blackmail victims, each paying a little of month, with an occasional big client, I would estimate my annual income is around a thousand dollars a week."

"I'd say it's more like seventy-five thousand dollars."

All his movements froze for a split second, then he turned a puzzled stare on me. Some of his self-confidence crumbled and his face paled slightly. It was the first time in the two years that I had known him that Kross showed any sign of nervousness.

The porcelain smile suddenly was dull.

"W-what makes you think it's that much?" he asked, his voice husky.

I tugged a small notebook from my coat pocket. "You have approximately thirty victims each paying you an average of one hundred and fifty dollars to two hundred dollars a month, with four who, judging from their financial status, probably are paying you between four and six hundred dollars a month. My figures add up to an estimated take of seventy-five a year."

I gave Kross a smile and made it as porcelain as I could. "Am I correct?"

"A little off," he admitted, still

stunned. "It's closer to eighty thousand dollars."

"I must have overlooked a victim or two," I said, jotting the new figure in my notebook.

Kross stood up suddenly, letting the attache case swing down and slap against his right leg.

"You've been following me as I made my collections," he said loudly.

"That's right."

Kross stared out across the white landscape of the park.

"How long?" he asked. "When did you start following me?"

"The day after a police lieutenant named Dawes came to see me," I said. "The lieutenant was investigating a tip that you were blackmailing me. I denied it, of course, but I don't think he believed me."

"Where would Dawes get the idea I was blackmailing you?" Kross asked.

"An anonymous tip, I understand."

Kross bit his lower lip thoughtfully. "Now who could have tipped him off?"

"I did."

"You?"

I nodded. "I thought if the police suspected I was being blackmailed, it would help when I talked to you about the one hundred and fifty dollars I've been paying you."

Kross stared at me as though I were a stranger. I never had talked to him like this before. Like most of his "clients," I was afraid of him and always was on the defensive around him.

Kross tossed his cigarette away and tried his porcelain smile on me again.

"I'm beginning to suspect, Mr. Grayson, that you've been trying to devise some plan to keep from paying me.

"That was my original plan," I admitted. "But now I'm no longer interested in the one hundred and fifty dollars a month. In fact, Kross, I've decided to become your partner. Half of eighty thousand a year sounds like a nice tidy sum."

Kross laughed, but he had to force the humor. "You're nuts if you think I'll take you in as a partner."

"I'm afraid you don't have any other choice," I told him. "If you don't, I'll go to the police and charge you with blackmailing me."

"Now I know you're bluffing," he said. "If you go to the police, the Schaffer Company will find out about your prison record and discover you're a convicted embezzler and a parole violator. You'll lose your job, your wife and even go back to prison."

"Maybe," I admitted. "But you'll go to prison, too. Blackmail is a very serious crime and carries a stiff prison term in this state."

"You'll never be able to prove that I've been blackmailing you,"

Kross said. "It'll be your word against mine."

"Oh, I'll be able to prove it," I assured him. "The police already suspect I'm being blackmailed and after I tell them about my record, they'll know what you had on me. Too, after I furnish them with the names of some of your other victims, I'm sure the police can convince one or more of them to testify against you. Especially if they promise the victims immunity against prosecution in exchange for their testimony."

Kross shook his head, as though he were unable to believe what he was hearing.

"Last, but not least," I continued, "my wife and child have been up on that hill for the past ten minutes. My wife has a camera with a telescopic lens and she is an excellent photographer. I'm sure she took some very interesting pictures of our recent transaction."

I waved to the woman playing with the child on the hill. The child waved back.

Kross sat down heavily on the park bench.

"You're crazy," he muttered. "You're stark raving mad."

"I've never been saner in my life," I said. "It all boils down to the fact that I'm gambling the loss of an eight hundred dollar a month job, plus the possibility of spending several more years in jail, against getting half of a very lucrative blackmail business.

"You, on the other hand, will be gambling against drawing a long prison term plus the loss of your blackmail business. You have a lot more to lose than I do, Kross."

He stared at me. "Why, it's blackmail!"

"Precisely," I said. "And all the details of your blackmail racket, victims' names, a record of my payments, and other data have been placed in the hands of a friend who has orders to mail it to the police in the event of my sudden death."

"Blackmailed," Kross murmured. "Me, Joe Kross, being blackmailed."

"You now have one of two choices" I said. "You can pay me and keep from going to prison for blackmail or you can kill me and take your chances with trying to beat a murder rap."

He paid.

He knew he'd damn well better.

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